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BAPS NATIONAL CONVENTION 2013
4-14 July, Atlanta, USA

MURTI-PRATISHTHAS OF NEW BAPS MANDIRS

10 July 2013, Sarangpur

With the guidance and blessings of Pramukh Swami Maharaj, BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha continues to build mandirs worldwide to help nurture Hindu traditions and worship. In Sarangpur, on 10 July 2013, Swamishri performed the Vedic *murti-pratishtha* rituals and *arti* for the *murtis* of the new BAPS *shikharbaddh* mandir nearing completion in Himmatnagar. Thousands of devotees from Himmatnagar and its surrounding towns and villages were present to witness this auspicious occasion.

Also, on this special occasion, Swamishri performed the *murti-pratishtha* rituals for 12 BAPS *hari* mandirs.

SWAMINARAYAN BLISS

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Akshar-Purushottam Maharaj

In April 1978 Pramukh Swami Maharaj inspired and inaugurated the first issue of *Swaminarayan Bliss* in Ahmedabad, Gujarat. The bi-monthly magazine serves to enlighten BAPS youths, seniors and well-wishers about the glory of Bhagwan Swaminarayan, the Akshar-Purushottam philosophy and the Gunatit guru *parampara*. It also seeks to inspire the universal values and traditions of Hinduism to pursue a happy and peaceful life by serving God and humankind.

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First Word

Live wisely. Most people live a superficial life: a life focused only on pleasure, position and money. To live a more meaningful and productive life it is necessary to live a consciously, thoughtful life. By observing your life you will realize there are external and internal actions. Internal actions include your beliefs, thoughts and feelings. They mostly reflect upon your conversations, outward deeds and quality of life. Say you smile at your friend, but internally you may be jealous of or angry at him. This means that, externally, you appear nice and happy, but inwardly, because of your aversion, you are not at peace and relaxed. Mostly, people are not aware of what's going on in their inner self, but are overly concerned about their external self. This disparity between the inner and external selves is the cause of personal discontent and stress.

In the Mahabharat, Dhritrashtra, the blind father of the Kauravas and king of Hastinapur, pretended to be a wellwisher of the five Pandavas. In reality, all along, he had sanctioned his son's, Duryodhan's, evil designs and acts in harming or eliminating the Pandavas. Dhritrashtra's double standards became his own bane in his last years, when he suffered horrible nightmares and inner turmoil.

Allaiya Khachar was a dedicated disciple of Bhagwan Swaminarayan. He was a celibate and he endeavoured immensely for the spread of Satsang. In fact he had inspired satsang in the lives of 2,000 people. Despite his commitment and allegiance to Bhagwan Swaminarayan, his ego got the better of him. His outward appearance and actions reflected a positive picture in Satsang, but his inner self burned with the desire for appreciation and recognition above his peer devotees. Once, Maharaj visited Jhinjhavadar, where Allaiya lived and ruled. He feigned joy at Maharaj's arrival. Mulji Brahmachari, the attendant of Maharaj, perceived Allaiya's pretension of joy and chided him, "Maharaj lavishes praise and respect on you by addressing you as Saptarshi and yet you disregard Maharaj's greatness." Allaiya Khachar shot back, "Maharaj does not value me because he doesn't know my greatness. He ranks me third, after Dada Khachar and Sura Khachar. I am a celibate, whereas they are householders." On hearing these words of Allaiya Khachar, Maharaj replied, "Allaiya, even Sura Khachar cannot be rated with you with respect to your services and sacrifices. You are a celibate. Furthermore, you have travelled in the Valak region and inspired satsang in so many people. You also travel a lot with Swarupanand Swami. Therefore, there is no one comparable to you!" Allaiya Khachar felt pacified at Maharaj's words of praise. He folded his hands out of formality and said, "Maharaj, I was not aware that you hold me in such high esteem." Mulji Brahmachari could not restrain himself from thinking that Allaiya's days in Satsang were on the decline. Later, Allaiya Khachar left Satsang because of his ego.

Aligning one's good inner self through conscious, thoughtful living with one's outer actions amounts to living wisely. The more one bridges the gap between one's thoughts and words and actions the better the quality of life one experiences. To attain this, doing satsang and having the tutelage of a genuine guru are very important and necessary. ◆

Tilak-Chandlo

Shri Hari was in Panchala at the home of Jhinabhai Darbar. He celebrated the Fuldol festival and introduced the tradition of doing tilak-chandlo in the Swaminarayan Sampradaya...

FULDOL FESTIVAL IN PANCHALA (1821 CE (A.S. 1877))

Jhinabhai Darbar ordered a cartload of *gulal* (vermillion powder) from Mangrol to celebrate the Fuldol festival. Flowers of *kesuda* were plucked in abundance to give the water an orange hue. Nishkulanand Swami and Adharanand Swami left to acquire bamboos for making squirters. On the day of Fuldol everything was ready. Shri Hari had decided to fully satisfy the devotion and wishes of Jhinabhai. He had declared to Jhinabhai, "I will stay here for a month. I wish to call all the sadhus and hold a spiritual camp (*shibir*). The strong foundations of personal satsang lie in having spiritual knowledge and a firm faith in God's form. To achieve them one should be resolute in listening to spiritual discourses."

KASHIRAM PERFORMS PUJAN OF MAHARAJ

Devotees from far and near began arriving in Panchala for the Fuldol festival. Devotees from the regions of Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh had arrived. Everyone wished to perform *pujan* of Maharaj. The rush towards Maharaj resulted in chaos. To control the situation, Maharaj announced from his high seat, "Everyone will get a chance. Let those who are from far-off regions come forward first." Shri Hari then pointed to someone and signalled him to come to him. Maharaj's gesture made everyone look behind. They saw Kashiram Jamadar of Dhuvabarai coming forward, holding a large trunk. When he came near, Maharaj asked, "Kashiram, you wish to do *pujan*!" Kashiram was startled. He knew that God was all-knowing, but he had called him from a throng of leading devotees who were eager to perform his *pujan*. He folded his hands and uttered humbly, "Yes, Maharaj. I do. But how could I come through this large group of prominent devotees? And if I were left out today, the situation would have been the same tomorrow. Furthermore, I am in a hurry to return home. So, I was perplexed about what to do."

Shri Hari smiled and assured, "Kashiram, I do not leave anyone in a quandary. Come, you do the first *pujan*." And Kashiram performed *pujan* of Shri Hari by applying a *chandlo* and rice grains. Then he opened his trunk amidst the avid eyes of all. Maharaj smiled and enquired, "Kashiram, what do you have in the trunk?"

Kashiram replied hesitatingly, "My Lord, I have brought typical clothes and finery of my region." Instantly, Shri Hari stood up. Everyone was absorbed in the divine *murti* of Shriji Maharaj and the devotion of Kashiram. He took out a valuable dress prepared specially for Shri Hari. Maharaj put it on. Then Kashiram tied a dagger on Maharaj's waist, gave him a bow and placed a quiver full of arrows around his shoulder. This novel darshan of Maharaj was eagerly lapped up by the congregation.

Kashiram kept on taking out one item after another from his trunk. He placed a red *pagh* on Maharaj's head, pinned a *kalgi* made of gems on it and gave a bouquet of flowers in both hands. Shri Hari accepted Kashiram's devotion silently and with a beaming face. When the *pujan* ritual was over Maharaj asked, "Kashiram, is there anything left to offer?"

Kashiram merely folded his hands. Maharaj perceived from his face that he had one more wish, and so he asked, "Do you have any other wish?"

Kashiram replied, "Your blessings, and secondly Maharaj, take this bow in hand and string it with an arrow. I wish to have darshan of your divine form in this manner. I had nourished such a wish the moment the dress, bow and arrows were ready for you. You have fulfilled all my wishes so far. I ask you to fulfil this one too."

Shri Hari took the bow in his hand and drew one arrow from the quiver. Then he kneeled on one knee and strung the arrow on his bow. Shri Hari did not release the arrow. The divine darshan enthused the entire assembly. Rampratapbhai burst with joy, "Oh, how wonderful my brother Ghanshyam looks!" Immediately thereafter he saw the form of Bhagwan Ram in Maharaj. This amazed Rampratapbhai, and he began prostrating to him. Suddenly, the assembly was pervaded by the mellifluous singing of Brahmanand Swami, *"Lidhi Latkāle Nandlāl ke hāth kabān ne, … Nirkhi Brahmānand ke janam sufal māro kidhelo."* – "My Lord takes a bow in hand, … On seeing this Brahmanand's life has become worthwhile." The devotees in the assembly chorused the leading verse, *"Lidhi Latkāle…"* Joy spread through the entire congregation. Everyone relished the darshan of Maharaj without batting their eyelids. The devotees aspired that time freeze for eternity. Shri Hari read their inner thoughts and replied, 'Yes, time will stop. Shri Krishna had prolonged the night (of *ras*) with the *gopis* for six months. I will bless you with six months of happiness in one night. Whosoever remembers this incident will attain Akshardham."

The divine incident had afforded all with a transcendental experience. Shriji Maharaj gave the bow and arrows to Rampratapbhai and the jewel-studded dagger to Jhinabhai's brother, Gagabhai.

SHRI HARI INSTRUCTS HIS SADHUS TO DO TILAK-CHANDLO

Maharaj celebrated the *rangotsav* in Panchala with intense fervour. He squirted the sadhus and devotees with coloured water and he also became drenched in colours sprayed by them. Thereafter, every morning and evening he discoursed to the assembly.

One day, Shri Hari thought the opposition of *vairagis* and those averse to his sadhus and the Sampradaya was subsiding. On the other hand, Satsang was spreading rapidly, and more and more people were subscribing to a life of dharma. He felt it was time he introduced the outward signs of a Vaishnav ritual among his

sadhus. He called Jhinabhai and said, "The mud by the pond on the village outskirts is like *chandan* (sandalwood paste). Make arrangements to bring a little here. Once the mud was brought to him, Maharaj had it shaped like betel nuts. He gave one each to his sadhus and said, "From tomorrow onwards apply *tilak-chandlo* as a symbol of our Vaishnav tradition."

The next day when the sadhus came to Maharaj they did not have the *tilak-chandlo* on their foreheads. Maharaj enquired, "Why have you not done the *tilak*?" The sadhus were baffled and asked, "With what were we supposed to do the *tilak*?" Maharaj was surprised by their question. "Yesterday, I had given to you the betel nut-sized *gotis*. You were supposed to rub some of it into a paste and apply it as *tilak*."

The sadhus revealed with surprise, "Maharaj, we ate the *gotis* taking it to be *prasad* from you." Shri Hari felt his sadhus were very naïve. He said, "I will give you all a *goti* each for the second time. Tomorrow I'd like to see a proper *tilak* and *chandlo* on your forehead, chest and arms. They will be our Vaishnavi mark." Thus Maharaj gave another round of *gotis* to all his sadhus.

The following day when the sadhus arrived in the morning assembly Shri Hari observed their foreheads. He smiled at them and commented, "Why have you applied large and bizarre *tilaks* that would frighten even buffaloes? Learn to do them properly." The sadhus failed to understand Maharaj's words.

TILAK AND CHANDLO

Shri Hari made all the sadhus sit in a row. Then he called Gunatitanand Swami to him and applied the *tilak* and *chandlo* on his forehead. Maharaj told him to walk with him along the row of sadhus, showing him to the sadhus and saying, "Look, this is my *tilak*!" Then he added, "There is no Bhagwan like me and no other sadhu like him." In this way Maharaj proclaimed his own greatness and also that of Gunatitanand Swami. Maharaj further declared, "When hundreds of thousands of people follow this sadhu, know that Satsang has developed."

At that time Gunatitanand Swami was a *sevak* (one who serves) in the group of Muktanand Swami. In spite of this Maharaj revealed his true glory. For many it was difficult to grasp Gunatitanand Swami's greatness because of his simple and humble behaviour.

The next day Maharaj told Nityanand Swami to read the first chapter of the Shrimad Bhagvat and explain the *shlokas*. Shri Hari also elaborated on the first *shloka, "Janmāddasya yataha…"* "The qualities of *maya* and all its evolutes cannot be attributed to God or his form. When one associates with his sadhu one attains the highest knowledge of God's form and transcends *maya*."

Jhinabhai Darbar was overjoyed on hearing about the divinity of Maharaj's form. He realized that whatever Maharaj did was divine; whether he smiled or chided – all his actions were divine. For those who were of ordinary spiritual rank such actions would definitely test their faith.

The next day, Muni Bawa complained to Shri Hari, "Maharaj, Haryanand Swami and Vishvaschaitanyanand Swami have become *sadgurus* by themselves, and are asking for various material things from devotees and exploiting them." Maharaj immediately called them. When he asked the two sadhus whether what he had heard was true, they remained quiet. Shri Hari reproached them, "My sadhus should not ask anything from devotees, even for selfless purposes. And whosoever does so will have blasphemed against the guru and his words." ◆

(Contd. in next issue)

Translated from Gujarati text of
Bhagwan Swaminarayan by Shri H.T. Dave

BAPS National Convention 2013

Overview and Preparations

4-14 July 2013, Atlanta

INTRODUCTION

From 4 to 14 July, North American National Convention 2013 was held at the BAPS Shri Swaminarayan Mandir in Atlanta, Georgia. The Bal/Balika, Kishore/Kishori, and Yuvak/Yuvati conventions were held three days for each. Over 8,000 children, teenagers and youths attended and 750 volunteers contributed their time and energy to ensure the smooth running of the conventions.

The three conventions were held as follows: *kishore-kishori* from 4 to 7 July, *balak-balika* from 7 to 10 and *yuvak-yuvati* from 11 to 14 July. Each convention was based on the central theme – 'Be Ekantik' – and the content of each was designed to appeal to the specific audiences. The messages were conveyed through audio-visual presentations, speeches by senior sadhus, discussions, skits, interactive sessions and a variety of other activities.

This was an opportunity for all to learn, understand and imbibe the concept of Ekantik Dharma: dharma (path of righteousness), *jnan* (knowledge of *atma*), vairagya (detachment from worldly objects) and bhakti (devotion).

EXHIBITION

An exhibition highlighted the key concepts and history that were incorporated in the conventions. Displays depicted what Ekantik Dharma is and how each of its four pillars is essential. Some panels portrayed the life and work of Bhagwan Swaminarayan and the guru *parampara*, showing how their lives exemplified Ekantik Dharma.

Video clips of Swamishri narrating his personal *prasangs* gave the attendees an insight

BAPS Shri Swaminarayan Mandir, Atlanta: venue for NC13

Delegates arrive for the convention

Participants rejoice during the convention

into Swamishri's perspective. A collection of items sanctified by Swamishri, from a basketball to shoes, helped remember *prasangs* that the youths had heard in the past. Tablets were set up which showed a map of the world with *prasangs* popping up as attendees clicked on certain cities.

The exhibition concluded with the relief activities inspired by Pramukh Swami Maharaj. It also described what a mandir is and why mandirs are essential for our spiritual elevation. To truly be *ekantik*, one would have to imbibe Swamishri's ideology, "In the joy of others lies our own."

PREPARATIONS

Planning and preparation for the convention spanned over three years, resulting in over 3,000 video conferences held via Google Hangout, detailed scripts totalling up to 791 pages and over 40 pages of written classroom content. To supplement all of the material and ensure the conventions ran according to plan, 27 in-person meetings were held across the continent.

Once the central theme for the *shibir* was finalized, the scripting and production of audio-visual presentations, skits, traditional dances and other programmes began. Each North American region was allotted specific responsibilities.

For final preparations, key participants arrived in Atlanta on 19 June for the "Samp Camp" – an intensive two-week period of preparation that was accomplished through teamwork. Samp Camp included daily rehearsals and detailed coordination of the convention schedules.

Throughout the camp, sadhus explained the vision behind the conventions, inspiring the participants to stay focused, and emphasized that the real purpose of the conventions was to please Swamishri. Before practices and *seva* youths would chant the *dhun* to pray for strength.

In addition to the programme preparations, many youths from Atlanta and nearby centres, such as, Charlotte, Perry, Birmingham, Tampa, and Albany helped with arrangements for the accommodation, catering, transport, decoration, housekeeping and other arrangements. ◆

Kishore-Kishori Convention

4-7 July 2013, Atlanta

The Kishore-Kishori Convention was attended by 1,910 *kishores* and 1,410 *kishoris* aged between 14 and 21, from North America, Australia, Hong Kong, and New Zealand.

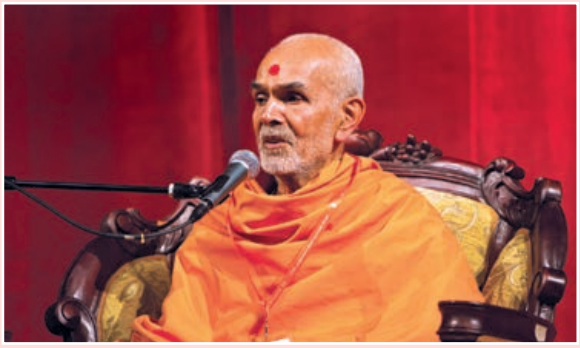
4 July 2013

In the afternoon, following registration, delegates were given a tour of the mandir to familiarize them with the mandir campus.

After the tour, the *kishores* and *kishoris* attended their respective soundstage programmes. The soundstage programmes gave the *kishores* and *kishoris* a new outlook on bhajan-bhakti, in which youngsters from each region presented a bhajan of their choice they had creatively customized in various musical styles, ranging from capella to rock, and even hip-hop/spoken word.

The first evening session began at 8.00 p.m. with a play about three youths and a father which would continue through the three days of the convention and come to a resolution on the final day. The three youths were shown facing the challenges youths encounter today. As the play progressed, the problems became bigger and the characters came to a point where they did not know what to do on their own. The play engrossed the *kishores* and *kishoris* as it mirrored their own feelings in such situations and also presented solutions. The session concluded with the play on a cliffhanger, leaving the *kishores* and *kishoris* thinking about the possible outcomes.

Over 3,300 *kishores* and *kishoris* attended the convention


Pujya Mahant Swami

Youths present a traditional dance

5 July 2013

In the morning session, the play continued as the characters attempted to solve their problems.

The session then transitioned into a colourful welcome celebration. The screens displayed the streets of Chhapaiya and as *kishores* danced on stage to welcome Maharaj and Swami into the assembly, everyone excitedly joined in with loud applause and cheers.

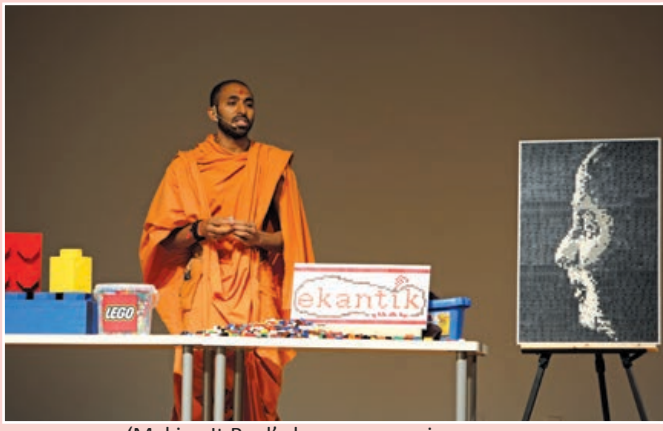
After the dance, *kishores* sang kirtans describing Maharaj's life from when he was Ghanshyam to when he became known as Sahajanand Swami. The kirtans contained the message of Ekantik Dharma.

Following the kirtans, the bhakti element of Ekantik Dharma was highlighted through stories depicting the joy experienced by the *paramhansas* and devotees of Maharaj's time through their offering of bhakti. It helped delegates understand that their talents and passions, such as singing, can be forms of bhakti. They also learnt that the same bliss experienced in Maharaj's time can still be experienced today through the *ekantik* guru *parampara*.

This was followed by a classroom session titled 'Making It Real', conducted by Snehmuni Swami. He helped the participants understand how the *ekantik* state is applicable to different aspects of their lives even as teenagers. He emphasized the point that having confidence in Satsang and knowing that mandir is righteous is very crucial to becoming *ekantik*. He mentioned that this mindset will enable them to be more comfortable practising satsang, that it is never too late to start trying to become *ekantik* and that becoming *ekantik* is a continuous process of learning, understanding and applying.

In the discussion groups that followed, the youths talked about how they could use the pillars of Ekantik Dharma to face their day-to-day problems. They concluded that imbibing Ekan-

A scene from the theme drama



'Making It Real' classroom session

tik Dharma in their daily lives would eventually aid them in solving their problems on a larger scale. After the discussions, the attendees returned to the main convention hall for the second and third classroom sessions.

The first of these, titled 'Dharma 2.0', introduced delegates to the idea that the right perspective on dharma is needed to progress in Satsang. The next session, 'Never Walk Alone', focused on the idea that the Satpurush walks alongside youths everyday. This session was closely tied to bhakti and helped both *kishores* and *kishoris* find ways to connect to the Satpurush. They learnt from Pujya Mahant Swami and Pujya Anandswarup Swami that even in the harshest of times, no matter how serious the situation may be, they will never be alone because of the bond they have maintained with Swamishri.

Group discussion activity

In the evening programme, the story of the characters progressed and their lives began to take a turn for the better. The storyline began to focus on the family's history and how satsang shaped who they are today. This introduced a detailed review of Swamishri's *vicharan* in North America and how Swamishri has been caring for youths in America since the 1970's. They saw Swamishri as an incomparable, compassionate leader, who is a constant source of moral support and is always there to help with any problems. The evening concluded with the characters coming to the revelation that Swamishri's blessings are vital to being successful and content in life.

6 July 2013

In the morning, the plot of the play progressed, as the three youths were transported to Chansad to witness Swamishri's childhood, his first meeting with Shastriji Maharaj, his *diksha*, and his appointment as Kothari of Sarangpur Mandir and Pramukh of BAPS. The *kishores* performed a dance and listened to Swamishri's Prabodhini Ekadashi discourse. The drama showed how great devotees such as Haka Bapu and Harjivan Swami had offered their bhakti.

In the classroom session titled 'Through My Eyes', Pujya Mahant Swami spoke on the importance of taking a different perspective on *prasangs*.

Youths visit the exhibition

Pujya Mahant Swami and sadhus

In the following group discussion the *kishores* and *kishoris* performed an activity in which a few participants tasted a very sour lemon. After eating the lemon they were then given a sweet 'miracle fruit', which negated the lemon's sour taste. The participants were then asked to taste the lemon again to realize the radical shift between the two tastes: sour and sweet. Through this sensory interaction, delegates realized the difference between satsang during Shastriji Maharaj's time and now. *Kishores* were able to relate to Pujya Mahant Swami's message regarding the hardships Swamishri faced.

The discussion then focused on what can be learnt from Swamishri's exemplary bhakti.

In the classroom session, 'Sanshai Atma Vinashyati', *kishores* learned that becoming *ekantik* can be accomplished by following the *agna* of the Satpurush and understanding oneself to be *atma*. The 'True Love' classroom session showed what true love for the Satpurush is and how to keep *dradh priti*, intense love, for him as explained in Vachanamrut Kariyani 11.

To end this classroom, *kishores* talked about faith versus logic and how to find the equilibrium between the two. *Kishores* then performed a trust activity in which one *kishore* falls and trusts that another will catch him. As many of them lost trust in a few rounds, they found out that Maharaj let Dada Khachar fall 17 times and yet Dada Khachar continued to trust Maharaj.

The evening programme was to take place outdoors in front of the mandir. Over 3,000 attendees were seated and excited for the programme to begin. Symbolizing their yearning to become *ekantik,* each delegate lit and placed a traditional *divo* by the reflection pond. Then, as the programme was about to start, there was a heavy downpour of rain. Everyone rushed indoors as fast as possible and earnestly chanted the *dhun*, which could be heard throughout the entire Family Activities Centre. After 30 minutes the rain subsided and the programme continued outside.

With all 3,000 youths back in their seats, everyone participated in the *maha arti* led by Pujya Mahant Swami. After the *arti* the audience was blessed by Pujya Mahant Swami.

Following his speech the attendees were treated to a spectacular light show as the lights on the mandir flashed colours to the beat of the music. As the music stopped the mandir lights turned off and it was completely dark. Then seconds later, fireworks shot into the air above the mandir and the sky was filled with sparks of colours and streaks of light. The mandir complex was filled with joyous cheering of the youths as the Kishore-Kishori Convention concluded. ◆

Bal-Balika Convention

7-10 July 2013, Atlanta

From 7 to 10 July, over 3,000 *balaks* and *balikas* from Canada, USA, Australia and New Zealand attended North American Convention 2013.

The convention featured four classroom sessions, theatrical performances and group activities to help the children understand the four pillars of Ekantik Dharma: dharma, *jnan, vairagya* and bhakti. Each classroom session consisted of a combined session and a group activity. The theatrical performances followed a storyline, which unfolded in the morning and evening sessions.

7 July 2013

After registration, delegates were taken on a mandir tour, which provided them with an introduction to the main theme of the convention and acquainted them with the mandir campus.

After the mandir tour, delegates enjoyed the NC13 Showcase, which was an outdoor celebration featuring games, snacks, photo booths and live sound stage performances by delegates from across the country.

The first evening session introduced the storyline that would guide the young delegates through the next few days. Through the characters of Akshar, Yogi, Kirtan and Chirag the *balaks* and *balikas* were able to connect to the message since the problems the stage characters faced resembled today's real-life problems. The delegates

Over 3,000 *balaks* and *balikas* attended the convention

Children enjoy the presentations

Balaks perform on the sound stage

watched as the main character, Akshar, struggled with his *niyam*-dharma and left with the realization that to become *ekantik*, "I have to first know and follow the basic *agnas* that Swamishri has asked me to follow."

8 July 2013

The first session continued the story from the previous night. Akshar was preparing for school and felt restricted by some *niyams* that were affecting his appearance and his popularity. Through Akshar's struggles and the guidance of his younger brother, Yogi, delegates understood that to become *ekantik*, "I have to have self-confidence, even when I feel people will not accept me for who I am."

The delegates then proceeded to their first classroom session on 'Dharma'. In the Dharma group discussion the children came to an understanding that in order to please Swamishri they had to be honest and respect their parents.

The delegates then participated in a group activity which showed videos of people in different everyday life situations and discussed how a child following dharma would deal with those situations.

Thereafter, half of the delegates proceeded to a question and answer session with Pujya Mahant Swami and senior sadhus. They answered personal questions of the *balaks* and *balikas*, and helped them lay out a path towards becoming *ekantik*. The other half of the delegates had this session on Day 3 of the convention.

After lunch the delegates attended the second classroom session on 'Jnan'. Through the group session the children learnt that to progress along the path of becoming *ekantik* and please Swamishri they had to attend the weekly *sabha* and do daily Satsang reading.

In the group activity that followed the children were split into teams to participate in an entertaining quiz on their general Satsang

Balaks and *sanchalaks* arrive at the airport

Children perform the theme drama

knowledge based on the booklet *200 Things to Know and Remember.*

In the evening session, the storyline took the delegates into the past. Akshar travelled to the mall with Yogi and Kirtan. Through their journey in the mall, Akshar relived the childhood of Pramukh Swami Maharaj and on how Swamishri faced and successfully overcame challenges similar to those *balaks* and *balikas* face today. Delegates came away knowing "I have to follow the example Swamishri has set and live my life according to the principles he has laid out".

9 July 2013

The final day morning programme was held outdoors, and reflected on the past two days spent with Akshar. Many of the problems that had come up over the past two days were revisited through a show on a boat in the reflection pond in front of the mandir. Through this presentation, the children learnt that they were all trying to cross the ocean of *maya* and needed to board the boat with Bhagwan Swaminarayan and Swamishri to take them out of *maya* to Akshardham.

Delegates then proceeded to the third classroom on 'Vairagya', which showed the benefits of living a simple life, and how overcomplicating our lives leads us to becoming lost in the ocean of *maya*.

Delegates then participated in a memorable group activity. A giant version of the "LIFE" board game was set up and selected delegates played through the game encountering various situations that revealed the need for *vairagya* and a simpler life.

Following lunch, the final classroom on 'Bhakti', was held, in which the children were

Evening *arti*

Group discussion

Children discuss the convention's key messages

taught the importance of bhakti in everyday life. They learnt about the nine different forms of bhakti and that, at present, as students their main bhakti to God and guru is to study hard and do well in school.

In the final group activity each delegate took coloured sand and filled up a jar to represent the proportion of the nine types of bhakti in their lives.

The final evening programme brought an end to Akshar's story. Akshar goes for a basketball game, and in the process of enjoying himself breaks his *niyams*. Later that night Akshar realizes that everything he has done has displeased Swamishri and caused him pain. With Akshar's realization, the delegates also realize that "I have to constantly ask myself, will what I do please Bapa?".

After dinner, in the concluding session the delegates came up on stage and shared inspiring stories of other *balaks* and *balikas* from around the world. The stories were inspiring and guided the attendees to realize that becoming *ekantik* is a lifelong journey that has to continue once they return home from the convention. The session concluded with *samuh arti* and a rousing collective prayer around the reflection pond in front of the mandir.

10 July 2013

The delegates left the convention with a new understanding of what being *ekantik* means. Through their three-day journey the delegates experienced the mandir's divinity, learned the meaning of *ekantik* and the need to focus on pleasing Swamishri by constantly asking the question "Swami *raji thashe*?". ◆

A scene from the theme drama

Children participate during a classroom session

Yuvak-Yuvati Convention

11-14 July 2013, Atlanta

From 11 to 14 July 2013, 1,907 youths aged between 22 and 35 from all over North America and the Asia Pacific region attended the Yuvak-Yuvati Convention in Atlanta.

The theme of the convention was "Ekantik: Learn, Live, Love". The establishment of Ekantik Dharma was one of Bhagwan Swaminarayan's main goals.

Yuvaks and *yuvatis* have learned that earning the Satpurush's *rajipo* is the goal of our life. As they graduate to a stage in Satsang where they bear greater personal responsibility for their spiritual growth, they realize that the true measure of *rajipo* is gauged by how well they have adopted *ekantik* principles. Thus, they seek to understand these principles, put them into practice and reciprocate the love of the Satpurush who has gifted them this ultimate opportunity.

11 July

After registration, delegates were able to take part in multiple activities which included mandir darshan, *abhishek* of Nilkanth Varni Maharaj, viewing the NC13 and mandir exhibitions, taking part in the mandir tour, viewing the *prasadi* cars from Bapa's past *vicharan* in North America as well as reconnecting with old friends from other regions. Photo booths throughout the mandir campus allowed delegates to take photos of themselves and their fellow *yuvaks* to help treasure the memories of the convention.

After dinner, the first session began with a live skit reflecting on past *shibir*s and introduc-

Around 1,900 *yuvaks* and *yuvatis* attended the convention

Pujya Mahant Swami addresses the youths

Youths respond joyously to the live darshan of Swamishri

ing the theme for this convention.

Nilkanthseva Swami spoke on the topic 'Making Satsang Our Own', describing how this was the greatest *seva* that one can perform for Swamishri. This means that one has to learn what it takes to become *ekantik*. The day concluded with a mesmerizing fireworks show.

12 July

In the first morning session Amrutnandan Swami elaborated on the theme of 'Ekantik', using various props to emphasize the need to "Learn. Live. Love." He described that in satsang, we learn what true love and unconditional love is from Bapa and that the solutions to struggles experienced in spirituality lay in *ekantik* dharma.

In the next session Tyagvatsal Swami took the delegates back in time on a journey of Ekantik Dharma by highlighting various *prasangs* and works of Bhagwan Swaminarayan and Akshar-brahman Gunatitanand Swami.

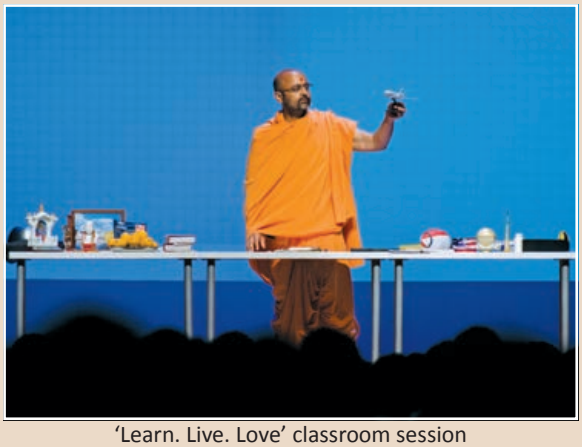
Amrutcharit Swami continued on this topic, detailing the work of Brahmaswarup Bhagatji Maharaj and Brahmaswarup Shastriji Maharaj.

Concluding the session, Pujya Mahant Swami spoke in detail on being *ekantik*. Through his personal experiences, he stressed that we cannot learn Ekantik Dharma only from shastras and that we need an Ekantik Satpurush to make us *ekantik*. He emphasized that everything Shriji Maharaj and the guru *parampara* have done is to firmly establish Ekantik Dharma.

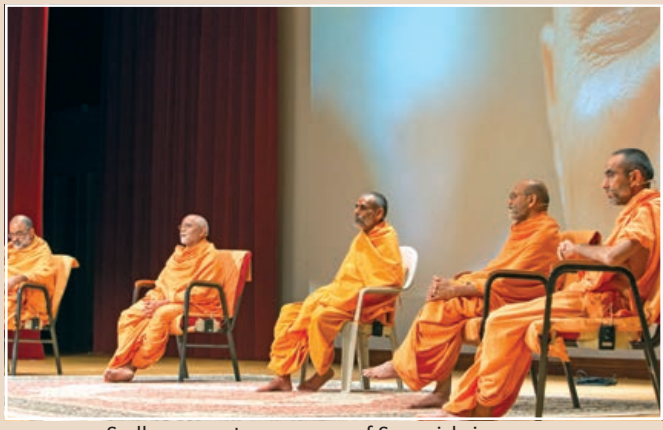
In the third session, Purnajivan Swami highlighted that just as we upgrade our phones to newer models because they are better, we also need to "upgrade to *Bhagwannu sukh* because *jagatnu sukh* is nothing in comparison to *Bhagwannu sukh*".

Pujya Anandswarup concluded the session by revealing that all the *sukh* of the universe and even the *sukh* of all the universes combined pales in comparison to *Bhagwannu sukh*.

After lunch, the youths had video darshan of Swamishri registering for this convention. This strengthened the divine feeling that both Swamishri and Shri Harikrishna Maharaj were present in the convention.



'Learn. Live. Love' classroom session



Sadhus narrate *prasangs* of Swamishri

Then, Chaitanyamurti Swami spoke, conveying the message, "Simply be *brahmarup*, *aksharrup* and *ekantik* by having *atmabuddhi* in the Satpurush."

Next, Brahmadarshan Swami talked about how everything happens due to God's will, but warned against using this to justify our own lack of effort.

Thereafter, a skit was performed, discussing tradeoffs between satsang, career and family, and how hard it is to become *ekantik*. Pujya Mahant Swami guided the youths on how to balance the three, be content in marriage and maintain a pure mind. He also mentioned, "*Bapa malya etle ekantik thaishu.*"

After dinner, the evening session began with *arti*, then a skit showing the hardships youths face in satsang when major changes occur in one's life. Pujya Anandswarup Swami gave guidance on how to overcome such hardships. There are times when *satsangis* need to make compromises in certain things, but they should remain firm in their satsang values, as compromising on this would be compromising on the supreme bliss of Maharaj. In essence, he said that people should not live two different lives: the life at work and the life in satsang.

13 July

The final day started with a video of Swamishri singing the bhajan, "*Hari vinā hitkāri biju koi tāru nathi...*" This was followed by three lively TED-style talks about making bhakti a major characteristic of one's home. The talks focused on the three main topics: improving one's daily puja, developing and sustaining one's *ghar* mandir and conducting *ghar sabha*.

Thereafter, the atmosphere changed and the delegates felt they were present in a classroom in Sarangpur where Pujya Mahant Swami started off the class reading the Vachanamrut to a group of sadhus seated before him. They asked him four questions based on the Vachanamrut.

The first question: What understanding should one keep when blessings do not come to fruition. Pujya Mahant Swami guided that one needs to realize that satsang is a pathway to attaining *moksha*, not a pharmacy, a bank, or any type of convenience store that provides worldly substances and that the hardships we receive are a blessing in disguise.

Second question: How can one avoid *abhav-avgun*. Pujya Mahant Swami clearly stated that even a person who has attained extreme grace from Bhagwan would not attain Akshardham if he takes *abhav-avgun*. He also specified that one should not take *abhav-avgun* even of someone who doesn't follow *niyams*.

The session concluded with a 'No Abhav-Avgun' protest parade through the *sabha* hall which motivated the youths to stop *abhav-avgun*.

In the next session, Priyaseva Swami and

Pujya Mahant Swami meets the youths

Youths explore the exhibition

Vivekmurti Swami spoke about the *mahima* of attaining satsang and the opportunity to become *ekantik*.

Concluding the session, Pujya Anandswarup Swami stressed the need to develop the mindset of a warrior preparing for battle. We should fight temptations and false beliefs, and inclinations to settle at being average. And with the inspiration of Bapa, we must have courage and embark on the path of being *ekantik*.

Then, for over 30 minutes, the youths had the great pleasure of watching a live broadcast of *guruhari* Pramukh Swami Maharaj as he interacted with the sadhus and devotees in Sarangpur. In the NC13 *sabha* hall the youths joyously danced and waved the BAPS flag as the sound of bhajans such as *"Mārā Swamini thāye vāh vāh..."* filled the atmosphere. Swamishri then graced all the delegates by giving live interaction over the video feed by waving his hands, throwing a football towards the youths, making a gesture with his hands over his eyes as if they were binoculars (giving a hint that he could see everyone in the *sabha* hall). When Bapa saw the live feed and the resolve of the youths to follow *niyams* to become *ekantik*, he said: *"Vah vah chhe ... apna yuvako ni pan vah vah chhe."* The youths were so charged by this event, that they carried on singing, clapping and dancing for another 20 minutes despite knowing that Bapa could no longer see them through the live feed.

After a delayed lunch, Anupam Swami led a session on how to do bhakti correctly. The delegates heard four inspirational *prasangs* from devotees who have suffered severe hardships yet still remain firm in practising satsang. Through their *prasangs* the delegates realized that the elevated *ekantik* state is something that they can strive for by keeping focus on it.

Brahmadarshan Swami followed with a speech about faith. There are so many things in this world that we accept without question, or without logic; similarly the road to becoming *ekantik* is not logical. He mentioned how extremely lucky we were to have found the *gunatit* guru, and now all that was needed was to have faith and trust.

Thereafter, Jnanpriya Swami, Jnanpurush Swami, Viveknidhi Swami, Yagnavallabh Swami and Anandswarup Swami shared different *prasangs* on how Swamishri has expressed his love and compassion in various ways. The delegates learnt that just as the sun rises for everyone, similarly Bapa showers his love on everyone.

Following dinner, in the final session of the convention Pujya Mahant Swami vividly narrated the key moment that had changed his life and enabled him to adopt the path of becoming a sadhu.

This led to the final prayer and pledge of the convention. Finally, the youths watched a series of entrancing videos and an explosive bang video on the seven screens to conclude the convention. ◆

PERSPECTIVES

AN INTRODUCTION

"Is the glass half full or half empty?" Before you continue reading, STOP! Take a minute, think about it, and answer. Write your answer here: _____.

Many of you probably did not need a minute; you answered spontaneously because, either you have been asked this question before, or just found this question to be simple. Either way, there is no right or wrong answer to this question. If there is no right or wrong answer, then why ask the question?

Well, because the answer does matter, and depending on who you are talking to, it could matter a great deal. For example, if a doctor is asking, your answer can tell him if you are likely to suffer from depression, your chances of successfully recovering from major surgery, and your relative life expectancy. If a potential employer is asking, your answer can indicate to him your attitude towards overcoming challenges and your approach to solving problems. Essentially, from your answer to this question, different groups of people can extract a little bit of who you are, and even who you have the potential to become.

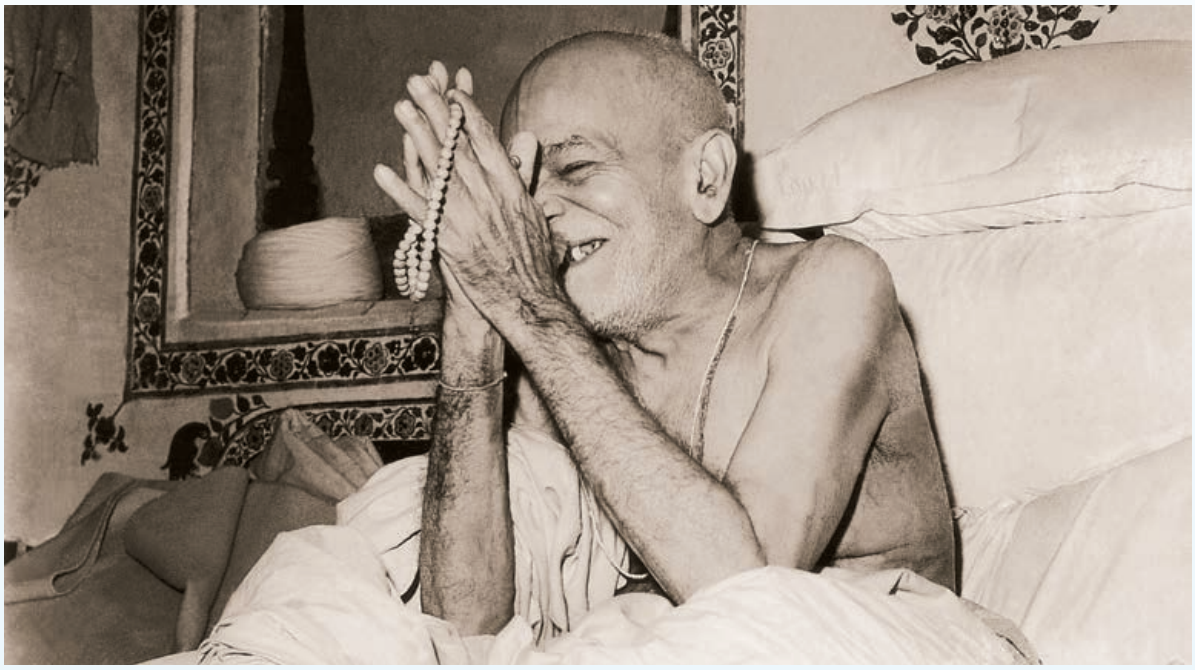
In effect, your answer tells them about your PERSPECTIVE. Perspective is important because it shapes your approach to the world. How you answered the first question is important, because it would, if it were an ideal test, reveal your attitude. Empirical research has shown the power of a positive attitude. Martin Seligman, a psychologist at the University of Pennsylvania, performed a study in which he examined how insurance salespersons explained their inability to make a sale. Those who were pessimistic and felt dejected were twice as likely to quit in their first year compared to optimists. The optimists, those who explained their failures in positive terms, sold 37 percent more insurance in their first two years on the job than did those with the pessimistic view.[1] Those who have a positive perspective and attitude are better prepared to succeed in life.

In the history of BAPS, there are countless individuals whose positive perspective and attitude are inspirational; prominent among them is Yogiji Maharaj. Yogiji Maharaj simply radiated positivity.

Once, Yogiji Maharaj, Mota Swami, and Harmanbhai were travelling in a horse-drawn carriage to the grove of mango trees that Bhagatji Maharaj had watered, when one of the carriage's wheels broke and collapsed. Chaos ensued as the carriage turned over and left this trio covered in dust and bruised. While Mota Swami chided the driver, Yogiji Maharaj began to laugh and declared, "A miracle!"

Surprised by this response, Mota Swami turned to Yogiji Maharaj and asked irately, "What miracle?"

1. Goleman, D. (1987) Research Affirms Power of Positive Thinking. *The New York Times*, [online] 3 February. [Accessed: 31 January 2013].



"We were saved!" explained Yogiji Maharaj. Hearing this, everyone burst into laughter. Yogiji Maharaj had found the silver lining. In fact, Yogiji Maharaj could see the silver lining in even the darkest clouds.

Yogiji Maharaj was once being accompanied by a pair of devotees to a train station, when a nearby group of schoolchildren began pointing at Yogiji Maharaj and laughing. One of the devotees marched over to the children and scolded them for having the impudence to mock a great sadhu like Yogiji Maharaj. After shutting the children up he returned to Yogiji Maharaj's side. Yogiji Maharaj gently asked him what he had done.

The devotee replied with indignation, "Those children had the nerve to laugh at you, so I gave them a piece of my mind!"

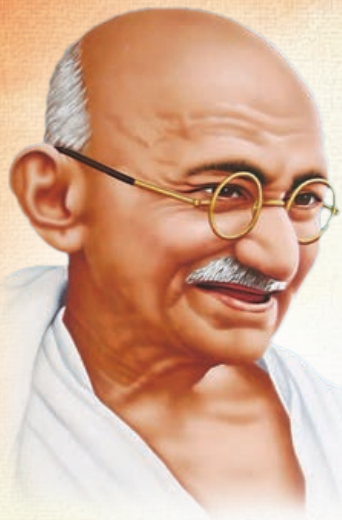
Yogiji Maharaj instantly replied, "At least they were not crying. Children should not cry. If they derived some amusement on seeing a sadhu then we should be happy to have been of service to them."

Yogiji Maharaj's remarkable ability to see the positive in overwhelmingly negative situations can spark self-reflection in even the most hardened pessimist.

Look back to where you wrote your answer at the beginning of this article. Now that you know the value of that answer, ask yourself if you are content with it. Are you content to be a pessimist after learning about the power of perspective? If your answer was an optimistic one, do you truly deserve the label? Do you strive every day to put a positive spin on the events in your life, like Yogiji Maharaj? The answers to these questions could not be more important, because of just how profoundly they impact your everyday actions and future success.

Happiness is attained not so much from our circumstances as from our perspectives on our circumstances. In the next two articles we will look at incidents from the lives of spiritual luminaries such as Gunatitanand Swami, the *paramhansas* and Yogiji Maharaj, as well as Mahatma Gandhi and *satsangi* youths growing up in the modern world to examine how we might learn to maintain a variety of positive perspectives in any situation that life throws at us. ◆

LIFE: Rushil Patel, Raleigh, North Carolina, USA



We Must See the Change We Wish to Be

Stunned, a lawyer spent the night on an empty railroad platform after an incident that left him smouldering with anger. Though he had purchased a first class train ticket, the ticket collector demanded he relocate to the third class cabin based on the colour of his skin. His refusal ensured his even more dramatic relocation – off the train.

This incident awakened this man to the injustices around him.

This incident inspired in him an urge to establish hope and equality in South Africa and later in India.

This incident compelled the young lawyer to devote himself to a mission of change.

This incident was a turning point in the life of Mohandas K. Gandhi. Gandhi's vision of a comfortable middle-class life as a loyal subject of the British Empire shattered as he hit the hard concrete railway platform of Pietermaritzburg, South Africa. He realized that if he wished to change the racial prejudice that he saw so prevalent in the world around him, he would have to change himself and inspire this change in countless others.

Memorial stone marks the place where Mohandas Gandhi was thrown off the train at Pietermaritzburg railway platform

This thought gave rise to his observation, "We need to be the change we wish to see in the world." This statement has inspired countless people to change their own lives in order to make the change in the outside world a reality.

But changing one's own life is easier said than done. Many people wish to change themselves, but in the face of ingrained habits and worldviews, their motivation fizzles out. How might one achieve the change in oneself?

Before we can *be* the

change, we need to *see* the change.

On the frontiers of the African republic of Botswana live two photographers who have spent the past 25 years filming documentaries for National Geographic on the indigenous wildlife. Beverly and Dereck Joubert have witnessed every predator-prey relationship, like the night they recorded a pack of lions pursuing a baby elephant. The battle had already ended before it could even begin as the lions all clawed their way into the baby elephant's thick skin. Gashed and scarred, the baby elephant swayed, slowed, and collapsed as if to acknowledge its fate, with the very will to survive extinguished in its eyes.

Most of the Jouberts' footage encompasses the basic primal balance of nature, but every so often, an encounter rewrites this natural law.

The video seemed to show an instant spark of inspiration flicker in the elephant's eye as it lay pinned by the pack. Sheer determination fuelled its strength to throw off the lions as they each scrambled to maintain their position with their claws. The young elephant lumbered off with the lions languishing with the same thought as their onlookers. What rekindled the elephant's energy, the flicker in its eyes?

The Jouberts remarked, "Everything has that will to survive, to fight, to push through that mental barrier...this elephant has become a symbol of inspiration for us."

The Jouberts were convinced that it could only have been an image of continuing to live that inspired the elephant to change the course to its death.

Visualization, seeing the outcome in our imagination, has the potential to energize our efforts and also inspire those around us to change. As a head coach in professional basketball, Phil Jackson holds eleven NBA titles, the most earned by any coach. Many attribute his record to his unique style of coaching. Regarded as a "Zen Master", Jackson used insights from Eastern philosophy to help his players visualize defeating their competitors.

In the practices leading up to the Lakers' match against the 76ers in the 2001 NBA Finals, Jackson asked his point guard Tryonn Lue to wear a sock on his arm. Wearing the sock enabled Lue to emulate Allen Inverson's compression arm sleeve during playtime. In this way, the team could envision their competition's star player well before the actual game. Lue's defense of Inverson combined with a stellar offense by Kobe Bryant and Shaquille O' Neal led the Lakers to their 4-1 series victory.

An early overview of their opponents helped the Lakers visualize their victory. Such success can spill over to each facet of our life, including Satsang.

In trying to overcome a flaw, such as anger, many people may have experienced that despite our best intentions, when we are presented with a situation that triggers our anger, we cannot help but become angry. In such cases, we are simply falling into the established habit loops that we have created for ourselves – the stimulus being that we are upset by someone, and the response being that we become angry with them. It is difficult to break that habit, which we call a *swabhav*, but we can start with visualization.

We might visualize someone trying to trigger our anger with a rude statement or action, and then imagine ourselves reacting calmly and with benevolence towards that person. As we continue to perform this visualization, over time, new habit patterns will form in our brain which will manifest themselves in our behaviour. Perform the visualization enough times, and the next time something triggers our anger, it will feel more natural and routine to react with calm and patience than it does to react with anger.

In this way, visualization can help us generate new mental habit patterns that can help us eradicate our flaws and develop virtues. That is why it is said that when we want to change ourselves, we must first *see* the change we want to *be*. ◆

LIFE: V. Limbachia, New Jersey, USA

DIVYABHAV
DIVINE PERSPECTIVE

Things are not always what they seem. One glance reveals one thing; a second glance uncovers something entirely different. That looks can be deceiving is true whether one looks at pictures or at the stories in history.

In 1867, William Seward, the United States' Secretary of State, decided to purchase the state of Alaska from Russia. Although he acquired nearly six million square miles for only seven million dollars, many prominent individuals had ridiculed his decision. In fact, it famously came to be known as "Seward's folly". *The New York Tribune* scathingly noted that Alaska "contained nothing of value but furbearing animals, and these had been hunted until they were nearly extinct". But, of course, things are not always what they seem. In 1898, large quantities of gold and other valuable natural resources were discovered in Alaska. What had been labeled Seward's folly was suddenly a brilliant decision. Looks proved to be deceiving in Alaska, just as simple illusions prove to be deceiving.

That looks can be deceiving is a lesson that Gunatitanand Swami has made spiritual too. Gunatitanand Swami once accompanied a few of his sadhus and devotees to the forest area called Gir in the Junagadh region. Being in a remote and secluded area, the inhabitants of Gir were largely ignorant of the world beyond their mountain. Generation after generation had grown up in the forest without ever leaving, and so it was no surprise that the children in the forest knew nothing about *sakar* (crystallized sugar). When the sadhus and devotees saw the children in the forest, they reached into their travelling bags and gave them *sakar*. The children looked at the unknown gift and equated it to the dried resin from a tree. As they the tasted the *sakar*, they started praising the sweetness of the "dried resin". Seeing this, Gunatitanand Swami, said to the sadhus and devotees, "The children enjoy the sweetness of the *sakar* believing it is sweet resin. Many devotees often make a similar mistake in that they enjoy the bliss of Maharaj and Swami, not as divine – as they actually are – but as mundane." Gunatitanand Swami's words capture just how deceiving looks can be for the devotee: we can see Pramukh Swami Maharaj, enjoy his company, and learn from his life, all while misunderstanding who he truly is. We would be taking Alaska as we know it today, or even as it came to be known in the 1890s, and treating it like we were stuck in 1867. We would be letting looks deceive us, as they do with these optical illusions.

William Seward

Gunatitanand Swami thus reveals

the "perspective problem" for viewing the divine: because God and his *satpurush* assume human forms, they outwardly appear all too similar to us. The interactions, he warns, that devotees share with them may yield moments of bliss, but those moments can be tainted with misunderstanding. When Pramukh Swami Maharaj exhibits human qualities, like falling ill, the devotee can be deceived into thinking that God and the *satpurush* are not truly divine. To learn how to guard against this possibility, one has to look only to the lives of spiritual giants.

Yogiji Maharaj

Yogiji Maharaj firmly believed in observing decorum in Thakorji's presence. This meant not only offering any food he would eat to Thakorji, but also engaging in devotional acts with single-minded focus. Once, in Bhavnagar, while *arti* was going on, Yogiji Maharaj witnessed Shastriji Maharaj eating a mango in front of Thakorji. Shastriji Maharaj had not offered the fruit to Thakorji, said his prayers before eating the mango, or waited until after *arti* to have it. But Yogiji Maharaj viewed the incident as *lila*, a divine act, that would forever immortalize that image of Thakorji and Shastriji Maharaj for whoever witnessed it. To see human-like acts as opportunities for growing closer to Maharaj and the *satpurush* is what Maharaj encourages. In Gadhada I 78, Maharaj notes, "One who has total conviction in God, will not be misled upon seeing him display human attributes such as happiness, sadness, fear, valour, etc. In fact, he will look upon these actions to be redemptive and for his benefit." Yogiji Maharaj's attitude illustrates the perspective a devotee needs in viewing the divine; this perspective requires one to let go of one's preconceived notions – in this case, any notions about decorum in Thakorji's presence – and interpret the *satpurush's* acts in a manner consistent with Gadhada I 78.

A devotee can avoid misunderstanding the *satpurush's* true form by recognizing that as a limited *jiva*, one lacks the perspective to assess the *satpurush's* actions. In Gondal, while Yogiji Maharaj was serving *thal* to Thakorji, he took a small *pendo* and ate it. Mahant Swami was surprised, as eating a sweet, and that, too, while seated in front of Thakorji was atypical of Yogiji Maharaj. In fact, he was so surprised that he started to trace where that *pendo* had come from. He went to the kitchen and found out that a devotee had brought it with a wish that Yogiji Maharaj would eat his offerings. The devotee was poor, and had worked for weeks to save up money to buy milk. After buying the milk, he went through the tedious process of heating the milk, making the batter and adding the sugar to make the *pendo*. It was only to fulfil this devotee's wish that Yogiji Maharaj

Brahmanand Swami

had so uncharacteristically eaten the sweet. The humility required to recognize one's limited perspective is crucial, because a person lacking this humility, who has no idea of the history behind the *pendo*, could easily mistake Yogiji Maharaj's act.

To view this incident of Yogiji Maharaj without humility, to think that one has a complete perspective, would be to illustrate just how deceiving looks can be. It would be like reading Alaska's history until 1868 and then deciding just how smart Secretary Seward's decision was. Instead, by exercising humility in recognizing one's limitations, one can attain the same divine perspective held by spiritual giants, like Yogiji Maharaj. That divine perspective is one where looks can never be deceiving, because the looks, no matter how anomalous, are always filtered through a lens that sees no flaws.

Sometimes, though a devotee may be aware that he should perceive divinity in all the actions of God and the *satpurush*, his perspective may be tainted, not by any actions performed by God and the *satpurush*, but by the negative reactions of his own mind due to physical hardships, emotional conflicts, feeling insulted or other inner struggles. His own lens may be warped, causing him to misperceive God and the *satpurush* as warped. In such situations, one can gain inspiration and guidance on how to maintain a divine perspective by studying our satsang history, which is filled with examples of sadhus and devotees who maintained a divine perspective despite great hardship, injustice and suffering.

Among the *paramhansa*-poets of Shriji Maharaj, Brahmanand Swami was among the most prominent. A gifted poet who was awarded great wealth by kings, Brahmanand Swami gave up his vaunted life to live as a simple sadhu. As a sadhu, he no longer had the luxuries of his prior life. Once, Shriji Maharaj was in Kundal along with Brahmanand Swami and some other sadhus. Amidst discussions, Shriji Maharaj said, "Brahmanand Swami, sing a bhajan."

No mellifluous sound emerged. Instead, a pair of hands rummaging through the dust could be seen. Puzzled, Maharaj asked Brahmanand Swami what he was doing. "Maharaj," he humbly replied, "I will sing a bhajan if someone who can see would hand me my sitar."

"It is right next to you," replied Maharaj. "Can't you see it?"

Brahmanand Swami then admitted that while he had not gone completely blind, he and many of the sadhus he travelled with suffered from night blindness. "Forgive me Lord, I am not complaining," he assured Maharaj. "It has been one-and-a-half years since you forbade us from eating anything containing any of the six types of taste. Many sadhus have become weak due to a lack of nutrition in our food."

But Brahmanand Swami's trials had not been merely physical. He had given up not only the luxuries of royal courts, but the prestige and honour that came with them. After all, Maharaj's *paramhansas* had faced great opposition from many intolerant groups. They

were insulted and harassed in many situations. Brahmanand Swami and Muktanand Swami had once been held captive by an evil *bawa*, who was plotting to cut off their ears and noses. He had tied them to a pillar and would have succeeded had it not been for the courage of a passerby.

In spite of all these trials, Brahmanand Swami's perspective was one in which he felt blessed. When Brahmanand Swami's relatives heard that he had become a sadhu, they went to convince him to return to his worldly life. To help them understand why he would not return, Brahmanand Swami composed the beautiful bhajan, "*Vahālā lāgo chho vishva ādhār re…*". In this bhajan, Brahmanand Swami explains, "My mind is fully attracted to you [Shriji Maharaj] and I do not want to know or rely on anyone else. I have sold myself to you to be in your service. You are my sole owner as I have made this engagement with you."

The love, enthusiasm, and understanding that Brahmanand Swami had when he first became a sadhu remained firm throughout his life. Shortly after Maharaj returned to Akshardham, Brahmanand Swami was overcome with grief. He would break down and cry in front of Gopinathji's *murti* and often fall unconscious. Seeing Brahmanand Swami's lamentations, Maharaj appeared from the *murti* and gave darshan to Brahmanand Swami. Overcome with joy, Brahmanand Swami wrote the bhajan, "*Harivar hirlo re…*". In this bhajan, Brahmanand Swami writes, "I found a diamond in the form of Harivar, 'Shri Hari', at Gopinathji Maharaj's mandir. Even if we spend millions to get this diamond; it is impossible to get hold of it, even at the cost of a hundred heads (sacrificing one's life a hundred times). I have got hold of such a priceless diamond (in the form of Shri Hari)."

Brahmanand Swami's perspective remained unchanged even after a lifetime of trials and tribulations: he still saw himself as privileged

Murti of Gopinath Dev (centre), Swaminarayan Mandir, Gadhada

and blessed to have Maharaj's divine company. It would be easy to understand if Brahmanand Swami, who could have enjoyed the company and luxuries of royalty, resented his decision to become a sadhu. Instead, his perspective – a perspective which we must aspire to attain – was that Maharaj's association is so great that he, as he writes in *Harivar hirlo re*, "would not dispossess it for a second, even while eating, sleeping, walking or dreaming." Thus, Brahmanand Swami's perspective that Maharaj was divine gave him such strength and enthusiasm that worldly sufferings and miseries seemed inconsequential to him compared to the divinity that he had attained in the form of Maharaj. ◆

TUKARAM

The Great Saint-poet of Maharashtra

The name of Tukaram brings to one's mind the *murti* of Panduranga Vithal (Krishna) of Pandharpur. They are inseparable. In one of the thousands of *abhangas* (the word means 'indestructible') or bhajans by Tukaram, he has written, "To praise anyone except Panduranga is to me a crime equivalent to killing a Brahmin… If I swerve from my single-minded devotion to Vishnu, may my tongue be torn into thousands of pieces." In another *abhanga,* he proclaims, "I am an inhabitant of Vaikuntha, I have come here from Vaikuntha." The reason for his coming from Vaikuntha is explained in the following words, "(I have come here) to sound the drum of Dharma, to destroy Kaliyuga, so as to make devotees take the name of Bhagwan amid acclamations of 'Victory, victory'."

The *murti* of Panduranga Vithal in Pandharpur stands on a brick with arms resting on his hips. It is said Bhagwan Krishna once visited his devotee, Pundarika. Since he was busy serving his parents, Pundarika offered a brick to the Lord to stand on; which he did. When the devotee was through with his filial service, he met Bhagwan Krishna. He asked the Lord to stay at Pandharpur permanently, hence the posture.

FAMILY HERITAGE

Tukaram (1608-1649 CE) inherited his love for Vithal as a proud family heritage from his ancestor, Vishvambhar Buva, who preceded him by several generations, and his parents, Bolhoba and Kankai, who lived in Dehu, near Pune in Maharashtra. The followers of Tukaram claim a glorious descent for the saint. They insist he had previously been born as Prahlad, who was protected by Lord Nrusinha, Angad during the time of Bhagwan Ram and Uddhav, who served Bhagwan Krishna. He is also believed to be an incarnation of Namdev (1270-1320 CE).

Tukaram's birth was also special. According to legend, once Lord Hari, addressing his devotees in Vaikuntha, said, "In the family of Vishvambhar there is now a saint name Bolhoba; I am resolved to present him with a son who shall be a world saviour and world teacher." Hari then led Namdev aside and reminded him that he had never finished the 1000 million *abhangas* he had promised to write; this then would be his "opportunity to assume the flesh again and finish the task". This is the story regarding the birth of the saint.

Tukaram's predecessors treated their spiritual legacy as a priceless one, but the saint surpassed all of them in this respect. He gave up everything for Bhagwan Vithal, including a prosperous business, so that he could serve him better. Even when his business declined and collapsed Tukaram's faith in Hari remained as firm as

ever. His eighth ancestor, Vishvambhar, who following his mother's advice, visited Pandharpur every fortnight for nine months, used to go to the shrine with a glad heart but felt very sad on the return trip. Vishvambhar was friendly to sadhus and Brahmins whom he would feed on a regular basis. He was an honest businessman, a trait inherited by Tukaram. On his first visit Vishvambhar was accompanied by four companions. They walked to Pandharpur singing bhajans. When Vishvambhar had darshan of Panduranga Vithal in the mandir he recalled the lives and *lilas* of mahatmas like Pundarik, Namdev and Chokhamela (a Mahar (lower caste) devotee of Vithal), and lost bodily consciousness. Such had been his ecstasy on seeing the serene *murti* of Vithal.

Murti of Panduranga Vithal, Pandharpur

VITHAL'S PROMISE

When Vithal realized his devotee's difficulty in coming to Pandharpur every two weeks, he appeared to Vishvambhar in a dream and told him that he would himself come to Dehu, so that the devotee could worship with ease. According to legend, Vishvambhar went to a mango grove on the outskirts of Dehu with 50 to 100 villagers as directed in the dream. At the indicated spot the group found fragrant flowers, herbal plants and tulsi leaves. They started digging and found a beautiful *murti* of Vithal clad in *pitambar*, with a tulsi garland round the neck and also a *murti* of Rukmini. The devotees started shouting 'Jai' out of sheer joy. Vishvambhar took the *murtis* to the village and installed Vithal with great enthusiasm. This is how Vithal came to Dehu and it became an important centre of pilgrimage.

Tukaram has given some details of his personal life in his lyrical compositions.

EARLY LIFE

Mahipati is reputed to be a highly reliable biographer of Tukaram. His *Bhakta Vijaya* and *Bhakta Lilamrita* contain the story of the saint's life.

According to Mahipati, Tukaram Bolhoba Ambile, to give the saint his full name, was born in 1608 in Dehu on the right bank of the Indrayani River in present-day Maharashtra. Other sources mention different years for the saint's birth: 1568, 1577, 1588, while Marathi authorities maintain it was 1598. A temple dedicated to Tukaram stands where his house had once stood. The family was known for its piety. Tukaram's parents were great devotees of Vithal. For forty years both of them used to visit Pandharpur in the months of Ashadh (June- July) and Kartik (October-November). The father, who managed the family business, never believed in making money through dishonest deals. Despite being a very good businessman, he was honest to his finger tips.

It is said that when Tukaram was born there was an incredible lustre on his face, which dazzled his mother's eyes. She took her newborn son and placed him at the feet of Panduranga. Legend has it, following a divine revelation, she named the child Tukaram.

Tukaram was the second of three sons, the other two being Savaji and Kanhoba. At the time of Tukaram's birth his normally religious mother became much more so and showed signs

Mandir of Bhagwan Pandurang in Dehu, the birthplace of Tukaram

of extreme renunciation. It was to be so as she was to deliver a great *bhakta*. It is well said that coming events cast their shadow. She would not speak to anyone and showed great indifference to day-to-day affairs. But as the saint grew up he showed a strong inclination towards religion; a strong sign that he had been chosen by Panduranga himself. The saint inherited this trait from his mother in full measure.

As a child, Tukaram was fond of games. He had several playmates. Even in his *abhangas* he wrote a lot about Krishna's childhood *lilas*. As he grew up the seeds of bhakti for Hari, sown by his parents, took root and flourished. A stage came when he became totally absorbed in Krishna. This remained so till the end.

He cared little for birth status and caste. He brushed aside distinctions based on them. He recognized only one caste – that of the devotees of Hari.

He talks of his utter dependence on Hari in these words:

"As the stream to fishes thou,
As is to the calf the cow,
To a faithful wife how dear
Tidings of her Lord to hear!
How a miser's heart is set
On the wealth he hopes to get!
Such, says Tuka, such am I!
But for thee, I'd surely die."

FAMILY BUSINESS

Tukaram entered business in 1621, at the age of 13, when his elder brother Savji expressed his inability as he was interested more in the spiritual world.

Like other members of the family, he did not consider business to be a means of making money by hook or by crook. In fact, Tukaram ran the business like a *sarvodaya* enterprise where the buyer could take whatever he wanted, sometimes even without paying for it!

Tukaram says that as he followed the profession of a merchant it might create the impression that he is a *vaishya*. It is not so. He further says about birth that that family is pure and that country is sacred where Hari's servants are born.

In one of his compositions, Tukaram says:

"Between the low and lofty, God knows no difference.
Still to the faithful He shows All His glory."

The business prospered for a few years, then troubles followed. Even then he did not give up his honest ways. His faith in Hari was as steadfast as ever. He laughed away the taunts of other businessmen and well-meaning friends: "Look what your Hari has done. This is what happens in placing too much faith in Hari." He met with failure in everything he undertook. Despite their taunts others were convinced of Tukaram's goodness and helped him with money. But the new ventures turned out to be no better than the previous ones. The family was reduced to dire straits. The following is a chronology of Tukaram's woes: death of Tukaram's parents in 1625 and elder brother, Savji, becomes a sannyasi; in 1629 his business fails; in the worst ever famine in 1630 his elder wife, Rukhma, dies of hunger along with his eldest son. These were landmarks in the saint's life, not that they in any way affected his spiritual life. If anything, these tragedies only reinforced his faith in Panduranga.

SECOND MARRIAGE

By the time the business prospered and went bust Tukaram had already married twice.

When he was 14 Tukaram was married, as was the custom in those days. First, he was married to Rukhmabai. She turned out to be a devoted wife but was constantly dogged by ill health due to chronic asthma. So his parents decided that Tukaram should take a second wife. That is how Avalibai, also called Jijabai, came into his life. She was the daughter of a rich shopkeeper of Pune. Despite her nagging nature, she stood by her husband when he faced difficulties on the business front. By that time Rukhmabai had died of starvation along with her son in a terrible famine. Tukaram had also lost his eldest sister-in-law in an earlier famine. Four years after he entered business, Tukaram lost his parents. In the same year his eldest brother became a mendicant.

Tukaram had six children: three daughters – Kashibai, Bhagirathi and Gangabai – and three sons – Mahadev, Vithoba and Narayan. Narayan was born four months after Tukaram's death. The girls were married in a miraculous manner. When they came of marriageable age the saint was under pressure to find suitable bridegrooms. One day he found three boys belonging to his community playing in the street. He brought them home, married off his daughters to them and later held a wedding feast! Not a whimper of protest was raised by anyone. Bhagwan Vithal, undoubtedly, had a hand in the whole affair.

GOD TO HIS RESCUE

Misfortunes do not come singly. Tukaram put his shoulder to the wheel and soldiered on. One night a great storm broke out while Tukaram was driving an ox cart with a sack of grain. His companions had gone ahead. The saint cried in anguish, "The filthy world! I have embraced it! Hence my troubles! My father is dead; my brother has abandoned everything; I am bankrupt; hence my shame. Here I am; my companions have left me; no one will lend me a hand with this sack! O Hari, God of gods, I have no friend but thee! Run to help me!" As he spoke he saw a wayfaring man beside him. "It was Hari who had come to help him," says Mahipati. "Who are you?" asked the stranger, "Blocking the road in this way?" "I am a dealer in grain," said Tukaram, "and my companions have gone ahead." Then the sympathetic stranger put forth his hand and in a moment laid the sack on the ox. After that he stepped forward and showed Tukaram the way, till they came to the Indrayani River which was high in flood. But the stranger led the way and they crossed safely. Tukaram stood amazed and "Suddenly", says Mahipati triumphantly, "a flash of lightning showed Tukaram that his companion was wearing a *pitambar* (the usual yellow silk robe of Vishnu), had a sparkling *kaustubh* jewel round his throat, and wore a rosary of tulsi beads round his neck."

After the storm and rains it was the turn of drought. Hari once again came to the rescue of his devotee. In the hope of making money, Tukaram set out with bags of chillies for the Konkan region. On the way he constantly chanted the name of Hari. After reaching the sea, he unloaded his oxen under a *pipal* tree near a Shiva mandir. The villagers came and asked his price. He answered, "You know the usual price, don't you? Take what you want," and he let them fill the measure themselves. At first they feared he would check them, but his thoughts were far away, and he never interfered with them. The news spread through the village, and people came tumbling over each other. "We will pay you later on," they said. "Very good," said Tukaram. Some took handfuls, others kilos, according to their strength, and at last one rascal said, "I have plenty of money at home, I want a sack of chillies." "I will trust you," said Tukaram. Pious men understand God's purposes, but not the hard hearts of the wicked.

'PAY UP THE DUES'

Meanwhile, the kind-hearted stranger who helped Tukaram with the bag came on the scene. He went to the villagers and introduced himself as Tukaram's agent. He said those people who had taken chillies on credit should pay up the dues. The villagers said, "We do not know how much he gave." Then the stranger told them the exact quantity of chillies they had taken and the amounts due. They were left with no option but to pay the amount. Then remained only the rascal who had taken the whole sack of chillies. Tukaram's man said, after taking a rope in his hand, "Pay me or I will hang myself and ruin your whole village!" Then the villagers fell on the rascal, kicked him and cursed him. The latter had no option but to pay the whole amount as the others had done.

Meanwhile, the struggle between the boy scout businessman and unscrupulous elements continued unabated. Once, a cheat palmed off fake bracelets as gold ones. Tukaram had no money so at first he declined the offer. But the trickster agreed for part payment and gave him the bracelets. When the saint went to the debtors and presented the bracelets there was loud laughter all around when they discovered that the simple saint had once again been cheated.

But Avalibai could not let down her husband despite his reckless spending to help those in need. She pledged her ornaments and raised two hundred pieces of silver. She advised her husband to use the amount carefully and not waste it on beggars. Tukaram bought salt with the amount and went to Baleghat to sell the commodity and buy sugar with the money and sell it for cash again.

PUNISHMENT FOR 'MADNESS'

When Tukaram was returning home he found it difficult not to help a poor Brahmin who was sorely in need of two hundred and fifty rupees to ward off debtors. The saint took pity on him and gave him the two hundred and fifty rupees he was carrying. When Tukaram returned to Dehu, the people were convinced that he was 'mad'. They garlanded him with onions, seated him on a donkey and paraded him through the streets.

Now Tukaram had had enough. He was disgusted with the affairs of the world. He decided to bid goodbye to business. He was 21 then. By then he had lost his wife and son to a famine; both died crying for food. He sought solitude and the companionship of Hari more than ever. He sat in meditation for seven days. Then, according to Mahipati the saint heard a divine voice. Finally, he withdrew to a hill called Bhambhanath and had a vision of Vithal. His brother Kanhoba brought him home. But he lived as a recluse, returning to Dehu in the evening and going back to the hill for the rest of the day to worship Vithal.

Tukaram's fame reached the ears of Shivaji. He wanted to hear his kirtans. He sent a caparisoned horse, an umbrella and other paraphernalia to make the saint come to him. The saint was greatly saddened at the sight of gold coins and the horse sent to welcome him to Shivaji's presence. He declined the invitation and advised Shivaji to call himself the servant of Vithoba. Then Shivaji himself went to Lohogaon to listen to Tukaram's kirtans. Shivaji offered to give up everything to enjoy the bliss of the saint's company. But Tukaram advised Shivaji to carry on his duties. Tukaram and Ramdas were contemporaries; they were born in the same year. It is not clear whether they had ever met.

It is widely believed that Tukaram took *jalsamadhi* to meet his Hari. There is nothing surprising about his end. One day he walked into the Indrayani River. His rug, the cymbals in his hand and *tambura* fell down and he was never seen again. Thus ended the earthly existence of a saint who endured so much suffering to make others happy. ◆

VACHANAMRUT NIRUPAN

The Vachanamrut is a compilation of the spiritual discourses of Bhagwan Swaminarayan. It is read daily by countless devotees and is also elaborated upon by sadhus and volunteers during the daily katha in BAPS mandirs and assemblies.
An elaboration on an excerpt of a Vachanamrut has been given here. It has been translated from 'Satsang Saurabh' in Gujarati.

Bhakti Means Following the Spiritual Commands
Vachanāmrut, Gadhadā I 15

On Māgshar vadi 3, Samvat 1876 [4 December 1819], Shriji Mahārāj was sitting in Dādā Khāchar's darbār in Gadhadā. He was dressed entirely in white clothes. At that time, an assembly of all the sadhus as well as devotees from various places had gathered before him.

Thereupon Shriji Mahārāj said, "A person whose heart is filled with bhakti towards God feels, 'I want to act only according to God's and his Sant's commands.' Such is the spirit within his heart. Moreover, he never – even by mistake – utters, 'I will only be able to follow certain commands, but not others.'

DISTINCTIVE FEATURES OF THIS VACHANAMRUT

■ In this Vachanamrut, Bhagwan Swaminarayan describes the inner disposition required to offer bhakti to God. He gives clarity about what to do and how to progress spiritually. Further, he sheds light on the two attributes of a person possessing sincere bhakti:

1. Eagerness and courage to obey commands
2. Resoluteness and faith in beholding God's form while meditating.

SHRIJI MAHARAJ LIKES A PERSON WHO HAS BHAKTI TOWARDS GOD

■ Bhagwan Swaminarayan says, "Even if one is as virtuous as Naradji, but lacks bhakti for God, I do not like that person." (Gadhada I 37)

■ What is the outcome of being virtuous? It is having devotion to God and Satsang. Without these two, even the learned eventually debase themselves (Shikshapatri 114).

■ We see devotees singing bhajans, *arti*, etc. with great gusto. We also see them becoming devotional when engaged in different forms of bhakti, such as, darshan, turning *malas*, per-

forming puja, applying *tilak-chandlo*, pilgrimages, performing *yagnas*, etc.

However, such acts of bhakti towards God may not bear fruit if one does not have true love for God. Genuine bhakti is one that comes from the heart.

WHAT DOES HEARTFELT BHAKTI MEAN?

■ 'Bhakti from one's heart' means to surrender oneself to and reverentially love manifest God with the firm belief that he is flawless.

■ Bhakti for God should come from the bottom of one's heart, and it should fill the heart with love. The Hindu shastras praise such bhakti.

■ Tasks not rooted in good intentions do not last long. Only tasks undertaken with good intentions persist. Similarly, only bhakti that comes from the heart persists for life and leads to happines.

For instance, we may be assigned a *seva* of cleaning utensils, but if we do not put our heart into it, then we may do the *seva* in haste and without interest, only so that others may not scold us or perceive us in a negative light. We may even escape from the scene if an opportunity comes our way.

On the other hand, Swamishri washed utensils on the very day when he was appointed as president of BAPS. Even in old age, Swamishri seeks opportunities to do *seva*. This is because his *seva* and bhakti come from his heart.

WHAT IS THE INNER DISPOSITION OF A DEVOTEE WHO HAS PROFOUND BHAKTI?

■ His inner disposition is 'I want to act only according to God's and his Sant's commands'. But, how can one develop such inner disposition?

■ He sincerely wishes for spiritual progress and sees it in his own interest to act according to the commands of God and the Sant.

◆ Gunatitanand Swami used to give the example of famine-stricken people who came to Bhimnath Mandir in Saurashtra (Gujarat) to receive a single ladle of boiled bran in alms during the famine of 1823.

Bhimnath Mandir is situated on a small hill, with the river Nilka flowing at the bottom. While waiting in line to receive the food, the impatient paupers used to push each other. Annoyed with such behaviour, the persons serving the food would often shove them to control them. Subsequently, everybody in the line would go tumbling down towards the riverbank.

Despite being pushed around and insulted, the paupers would again queue up, sometimes three to four times, before they received any food.

Only such intense desire, like that of these paupers, can help us to develop the aforesaid inner disposition.

◆ Gunatitanand Swami's commands to Bhagatji Maharaj were difficult and challenging, but he wholeheartedly abided by them. Swami told him, "Call Girnar", "Mix the lime", "Prepare a canopy", "Shave the sadhus' heads", etc.

Bhagatji executed all these commands successfully, because he had understood the intense need to please Gunatitanand Swami for his spiritual progress.

◆ Satyakam Jabali's guru ordered him, "Tend to these 400 cows till they multiply to 1,000 and then come back for *brahmagnan*." Satyakam, with absolute faith in his guru's words, engrossed himself in caring for the cows. He obeyed this seemingly pointless command of his guru because he seriously felt the need for spiritual progress and saw his own self-interest in acting according to his guru's commands.

◆ Similarly, Bhagwan Swaminarayan's *paramhansas* and sadhus went through through 114 trials given by Maharaj. Some of them included commands like sitting in cold water during winter after midnight; wearing cloth made from

jute; staying under trees on the outskirts of villages; mixing all food received as alms into round balls and then eating them.

■ If one has love and affection then one can obey whatever difficult command one is given.

■ In Vachanamrut Kariyani 11, Bhagwan Swaminarayan describes the *gopis'* affection towards Shri Krishna, "He who has affection for his beloved, God, will never disobey the wishes of his beloved. That is the characteristic of affection.

"One who has true affection for a person acts according to that person's wishes. If he realizes his beloved will be pleased by his staying nearby, then he stays nearby. On the other hand, if he realizes his beloved will be pleased by his staying away, then he stays away; but in no way does he behave contrary to his beloved's wish. That is the characteristic of affection.

"Therefore, a person who has affection for God would never disobey God's commands. He would act only according to God's wishes. That is the characteristic of affection."

◆ Dada Khachar had deep affection towards Bhagwan Swaminarayan and so when the latter asked him to give his land, property and royal rights to his sisters, Dada immediately prepared a legal document to transfer everything to his sisters.

◆ Bhagwan Swaminarayan once wrote a letter from Bhadra addressing Sura Khachar, Somla Khachar, Mancha Khachar and other village leaders to go to Ramdas Swami in Ahmedabad and renounce instantly, become sadhus and meet him at Bhuj.

All the 18 devotees immediately followed Maharaj's commands. Without true affection for God it is very difficult to relinquish worldly pleasures and follow such commands.

◆ One can carry out such difficult commands by developing firm conviction of God coupled with knowledge of his glory.

■ Ramanand Swami wrote a letter from Bhuj to Nilkanth Varni in Loj that he should be prepared to embrace a pillar if he really desired to stay in Satsang. Upon receiving the letter Nilkanth immediately stood up and literally embraced a pillar. Because of his reverence for Ramanand Swami he obeyed Swami's commands.

◆ Acharya Raghuvirji Maharaj once arrived on a visit to Junagadh mandir. Following his arrival the festivities started. Insightful spiritual discourses were delivered and delicious foods were prepared every day. Even amidst such celebrations, when Gunatitanad Swami asked Jaga Swami to go and take care of the stock of fodder and grains at Sankhadavadar which was miles away from the mandir, Jaga Swami happily followed Swami's instruction.

◆ Once, Shastriji Maharaj ordered Yogiji Maharaj to prepare meals for labourers engaged in the mandir construction. Henceforth, Yogiiji Maharaj carried out his commands without a single lapse for 40 years.

■ One can follow the commands by cultivating immense faith and trust in God

◆ We have a great amount of trust in a doctor and in his words. Because of faith that a doctor will help us restore our health, we readily accept his advice for medications, injections, incisions, operations, dietary restrictions and even lifestyle changes.

◆ Similarly, God and his Sadhu are the doctors of our soul.

◆ Gunatitanand Swami has said, "I know only how to cure the disease of birth and death, but not anything else." Thus, if we develop firm faith that Swami's words will help us to get rid of lust, anger, greed, taste and ego we can easily follow all his injunctions.

◆ Bhagwan Swaminarayan's *paramhansas* once came to him and said:

"Kaho to matku na bhariye mite, kaho to anna na jamiye pete,

Kaho to pivu taji daiye pāni, rahiye maun na

boliye vāni,

Em himmat chhe mana māy, tame kaho te kem na thāy."

"If you say so we will not blink, eat, drink water or speak. We have such courage within, so what can we not do at your word!"

◆ In anticipation that Maharaj might ask to observe more stringent vows during Chaturmas, Muktanand Swami began to drink the bitter juice of neem leaves.

◆ Gunatitanand Swami once said, "Only one who puts aside all types of fears can please a Satpurush. This Pragji is such a devotee." Gunatitanand Swami once asked Pragji, "Can you speak about my glory to a senior sadhu like Pavitranand Swami?" Since Pragji didn't fear anybody, he obeyed Swami's wish and pleased him.

◆ Jaga Swami once asked Shastriji Maharaj, "Will you carry out the task of building mandirs and installing the *murtis* of Akshar and Purushottam?"

Shastriji Maharaj built six mandirs amidst great difficulties, and fulfilled the wish of Shriji Maharaj in establishing true *upasana* of Purushottam along with Akshar.

■ Lastly, one can carry out the commands if one firmly believes that…

◆ God will be pleased only if I behave according to his commands (Gadhada I 25).

◆ True greatness lies in observing the commands of God (Gadhada I 31).

◆ I will experience peace only if I act according to the injunctions of God (Gadhada I 34).

◆ Only those who act according to the injunctions of God are liberated (Gadhada II 6).

◆ Only one who follows the commands of the *satpurush* is behaving as the *atma* (Gadhada II 51).

◆ Gunatitanand Swami said, "To do as the Sant says is best. To do as per one's own wish is worst (14/8)."

◆ Gunatitanand Swami said, "A single command observed according to the injunction of the manifest God is more uplifting than ten million commands observed wilfully."

A devotee of some other faith once came to Yogiji Maharaj to break (end) his thirteen-month-long *dharna-parna* austerity. Yogiji Maharaj blessed him and later said, "Merits obtained from only one fast performed according to the commands of Shastriji Maharaj is more than such a thirteen-month fast."

◆ Kartikeya circumambulated the entire earth while Ganapati – as per the instructions of mother Parvati – circumambulated only a cow. However, Ganapati attained higher merits than Kartikeya, because he had acted according to the will of his mother.

◆ Yogiji Maharaj once said, "I joined Shastriji Maharaj in 1910. Thenceforth, till today in 1950, for all these 40 years, I have incessantly acted in accordance to Shastriji Maharaj's wish."

◆ Shastriji Maharaj asked Pramukh Swami to do the *seva* of mixing lime for construction activities in Atladra. Pramukh Swami employed himself fervently in that *seva*. The heat of the lime scalded his skin. Blisters developed on his entire body. Even then he did not give up the *seva*.

◆ Pramukh Swami Maharaj was once asked: "What is the secret of your spiritual progress?" Pramukh Swami Maharaj replied: "Whosoever has progressed has progressed by pleasing his guru, and by earning the guru's blessings and grace. I was fortunate to get a true guru. I too moulded my life according to his commands."

■ Secondly, such a devotee would never – even by mistake – utter, "I will only be able to follow certain commands, but not others." ◆

NEWS IS TO THE MIND WHAT SUGAR IS TO THE BODY

Last month, Swiss writer ***Rolf Dobelli*** *created a stir in media circles by propagating in an op-ed his well known aversion to news. Author of books such as 'The Art of Thinking Clearly' and 'What Do You Do For A Living?', Dobelli's works examine the meaning of success and the role of randomness in business and life. But Dobelli is most famous for not consuming news because, he believes, it is toxic. He spoke*

News Is to the Mind What SUGAR Is to the Body

In an interview that appeared in the *Sunday Times of India* on 5 May 2013, a Swiss writer, Rolf Dobelli, shares his thoughts about restricting his reading and watching of news. He has pretty much given up reading news. He counts the benefits of doing this, "It saves a lot of time and news does not allow you to make better decisions about important things in life. It does not offer any competitive advantage." He adds that he has not consumed news for several years. "News is to the mind what sugar is to the body. It is not good."

Rolf believes that news in the form of print or television gives you no choice other than what the journalists give you. "Journalists have a job to create content that sells advertising and increases circulation. So, that automatically filters out certain news and favours certain others." He also explains that news stories are often very addictive, "The news of 9/11 makes people want to know by the hour," and what more has happened or been found as evidence. Rolf adds, "A car crash somewhere is not relevant to me, it has no bearing on my life. I don't need to know it. Such news causes stress."

Rolf rejects that news make one knowledgeable to ideas and trends. He says, "Knowledge can never be an aggregation of news. You cannot build knowledge on news. Television is the worst form of journalism. It has 30 seconds to make a point. The pictures are scandalous and they are very bright and very loud. The least worst is the printed paper."

It is difficult for the majority of people to totally give up reading or watching the news, but discrimination (*vivek*) can help you reap many benefits. There is no need to read everything just because you have time and interest. Be selective. Skip news that are irrelevant to you, and read only the headlines or the first and last paragraphs of some news items. Read positive or inspiring stories that spur you with joy, to be good and helpful. Omit negative or glamorous news to remain stable-minded, good and happy. ◆

FAQs On Hinduism

From *Hinduism, An Introduction*
by Sadhu Vivekjivandas and Consultant Editor Dr Janak Dave,
published by Swaminarayan Aksharpith

Banyan tree – Kabirvad, Gujarat

Pipal tree

1. Why is the banyan tree considered sacred in India?

A banyan tree is a fig tree that grows into a giant tree. Its botanical name is *Ficus benghalensis*.

The banyan tree is characterized by its aerial prop roots which grow into thick trunks. With time the tree spreads laterally through its prop roots, and the latter become indistinguishable from the main trunk. One of the most famous banyan trees is the 'Kabirvad' in Gujarat. It has spread over 3.7 acres of land on an islet on the River Narmada near Bharuch. Records state that it is more than 300 years old. People frequent it for darshan, and the tourists to see one of nature's wonders.

In Hindu culture, the banyan tree is also called 'Kalpavriksha', meaning "wish-fulfilling divine tree." Bhagwan Shiva is often depicted sitting in silence under the banyan tree. Hindu married women worship the banyan tree annually in June on Vatasavitri Purnima (full moon day) with flowers, rice grains, milk and by winding thread around its trunk. They observe three days of austerities and pray for happiness and protection from widowhood.

2. What is the significance of the pipal tree?

Hindus, Buddhists and Jains consider the pipal tree to be sacred. It is also called the Sacred Fig or Bo-tree. It is a species of the banyan fig tree, and known by the botanical name of *Ficus religiosa*. It is a deciduous or semi-evergreen tree that is native to India, Nepal, Sri Lanka and China. It grows up to 30 metres with a trunk diameter of 3 metres.

Bhagwan Buddha is believed to have attained enlightenment underneath the Bo-tree. The tree came to be known as the 'Bodhi' tree. It is well-known as a symbol of happiness, prosperity, longevity and good luck.

Hindu sadhus meditate under the Bo-tree. For certain Buddhists the tree is often the site of Buddhist and animist shrines.

3. What is the significance of the *billi patra*?

The *billi patra* or *bael* is a middle-sized slender aromatic tree. It is a fruit bearing tree which is indigenous to India, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Laos, Cambodia and Thailand. The *billi patra* or *billi* leaves are used in worshipping the Shiva *linga*. On the occasion

of Shiva-*ratri*, Shaiva devotees observe a vigil all night and offer *billi* leaves while chanting "Om Namah Shivaya". The *billi* leaves are considered to be very sacred. In the holy month of Shravan (July or August) countless Shiva devotees offer *billi* leaves on Shiva *lingas* to appease Bhagwan Shiva and receive his blessings.

4. What is the significance of *ankol* and *akado* plants?

The Latin names of *ankol* and *akado* plants are *Algium Lamarkh* and *Calatropis Procera* respectively. Their flowers and leaves are dear to Hanumanji. Thus garlands of these flowers and leaves are offered to him.

Both plants grow in different parts of India. *Ankol* flowers are white and black in colour, whereas the *akado* flowers are either white or reddish. The height of *akado* plants ranges from a bush that is three to four feet high to a tree standing 25 to 40 feet.

The red *akado* plant is smaller in size ranging between two and six feet, while the white *akado* reaches to a height of 10 to 15 feet.

5. What is so special about the lotus flower?

The lotus is India's national flower. The lotus symbolizes truth (*satyam)*, auspiciousness *(shivam)* and beauty *(sundaram)*. Since God is attributed with the same virtues of *satyam, shivam* and *sundaram,* many parts of his body are compared to a lotus: lotus eyes, lotus feet, lotus hands, and he is described to be the lotus of our heart.

Offering *billi patras* on a Shiva linga

The lotus grows in muddy waters or ponds, yet remains beautiful, pure and unsoiled by the dirt. This means that even if one is born in an unholy family (like Prahlada was) or in the lowest caste one can blossom to perfection. Furthermore, in spite of living in a bad world a person can remain pure and be good. It also means that like a person of wisdom one should remain ever blissful and untouched by the ever-changing world of sorrow and joy.

The Yoga shastras describe the *chakras,* i.e subtle centres of consciousness in the body. Each one is associated with the lotus, having a certain number of petals. The Sahasrara Chakra in the crown of the head opens into a thousand petals when a person attains yogi-hood or God-realization. ◆

Akado plant

Lotus flower

'Swaminarayan Bhashyam'

A New Commentary on the Prasthantrayi

Swamishri honours and inaugurates the 'Swaminarayan Bhashyam' by Swami Bhadreshdas in 2007, Ahmedabad

In the Indian tradition of philosophy many different beliefs and principles were born out of deep studies and contemplations by great rishis and *acharyas*. The *acharyas* contemplated upon the ancient sacred texts of the Upanishads, Brahmasutras and the Bhagavad Gita. They wrote commentaries (*bhashyas*) on them and established schools of thoughts and *sampradayas*. Their efforts were of no ordinary feat in the history of Indian philosophy. Centuries later they are still highly valued and remain the basis of philosophical debates and novel elaborations.

Recently, in 2007, with the blessings and inspiration of Pramukh Swami Maharaj, Swami Bhadreshdas completed commentaries on the Upanishads, Bhagavad Gita and the Brahmasutras, all popularly known as the Prasthantrayi. His seminal work is called 'Swaminarayan Bhashyam'. It is the first ever *bhashya* or commentary of such proportions in the 21st century. The vice-chancellor of Chandrashekhar Saraswati University, Professor V.S. Vishnu Potty, opines, "In my view, this new interpretation opens our eyes to a new horizon in this field of knowledge in an objective manner. To people of unbiased mindset and free from preconceived notions, this new interpretation is a treatise and has to be highly appreciated, no doubt, with confidence. The whole text seems to be the output of tireless effort which explains comprehensively the Swaminarayan philosophy without slipping from the traditional path of the sacred scriptures. The lucid presentation of the whole work proves the power of intellectual skills of the writer that any seeker of knowledge can easily follow. This work of Swami Bhadreshdas has blossomed into a thought-provoking testament that would strengthen the faith of all followers of the Swaminarayan way of life. This is another jewel that has got itself placed in the ornament of Bhashya to the Brahmasutra which ornaments the neck of mother Upanishad."

WHAT IS THE PRASTHANTRAYI?

The Prasthantrayi comprises of three principal shastras: Upanishads, Brahmasutras and the Bhagavad Gita, that take one to the final goal of life, i.e. *moksha*.

Among the six orthodox systems of Indian philosophy: Sankhya, Yoga, Nyay, Vaisheshik, Purva Mimansa and Uttar Mimansa (Vedanta), the Vedanta system is believed to be the crest-jewel. Later, according to tradition, the *acharyas* interpreted

and wrote commentaries on the Upanishads, Brahmasutras and Bhagavad Gita to establish their own schools of Vedantic thought. Of these three texts the Upanishads are of utmost importance, because they are revealed texts. The Brahmasutras provides a systematization of the philosophy of the Upanishads. The Bhagavad Gita is an extremely popular shastra and highly venerated, so it was included into the *prasthana* group. The main *acharyas* who wrote *bhashyas* or commentaries on the Prasthantrayi were Shankaracharya, Ramanujacharya, Madhvacharya, Nimbarkacharya and Vallabhacharya.

In that same tradition of writing commentaries, Swami Bhadreshdas has written commentaries on the 10 Upanishads, Bhagavad Gita and Brahmasutras. All the *bhashyas* or commentaries by the *acharyas* reveal profound and sometimes hidden meanings of the sacred texts. The tradition of writing *bhashyas* is an ancient one. Each commentary by the great *acharyas* is set in a particular philosophical module. Not all commentaries are called *bhashyas*. The commentator must have a thorough study of the six systems of Indian philosophy and possess intellectual maturity, clarity of principles and an expertise in the Sanskrit language. Each *bhashya* reveals the writer's principle based upon the shlokas in the Prasthantrayi. Every word of each shloka is interpreted and commented upon in accordance to his philosophy. Sometimes, the words interpreted give new meanings that stand the academic scrutiny of other scholars. A *bhashya* also includes references from other shastras to substantiate the *acharya's* own school of thought. In addition, it also raises and satisfies arguments of other Vedantic schools by providing satisfactory references and logical answers to prove one's own principle. In brief, a *bhashya* or commentary reveals a new philosophical principle from the three main shastras in a logical, clear and simple manner.

According to the longstanding tradition and method of writing *bhashyas* the 'Swaminarayan Bhashyam' in Sanskrit by Swami Bhadreshdas establishes the philosophy of Bhagwan Swaminarayan, which is known as 'Swaminarayan Darshan'. Bhagwan Swaminarayan revealed his own philosophy in his discourses, delivered 200 years ago, which was compiled into the Vachanamrut in his time.

WHAT IS THE 'SWAMINARAYAN BHASHYAM'?

Swami Bhadreshdas, the author, explains about 'Swaminarayan Bhashyam', "For any new academic work, unique and novel contributions are its two main requisites. The principles presented in the 'Swaminarayan Bhashyam' are unique and novel. Bhagwan Swaminarayan gave references of the Upanishads and Bhagavad Gita in his discourses, and also his own novel interpretations and philosophical explanations to them. His perspectives were found to be valid according to the Upanishads, Gita and the Brahmasutras. Since this was known to H.H. Pramukh Swami Maharaj he instructed me to deeply study the Prasthantrayi and write commentaries based on Bhagwan Swaminarayan's philosophy. This was how I was inspired to write the 'Swaminarayan Bhashyam'."

In his Vachanamrut, Bhagwan Swaminarayan has mentioned that *jiva, ishwar, maya,* Brahman and Parabrahman are the five eternal, ontological realities. The 'Swaminarayan Bhashyam' deals with them in detail. It also focuses on the importance and unique identity of Aksharbrahman and Parabrahman. The Bhashya also gives a unique meaning to *brahmavidya* (spiritual knowledge) by elucidating the knowledge about Aksharbrahman and Parabrahman. It further establishes Bhagwan Swaminarayan's principle of becoming *brahmarup* and offering *upasana* and bhakti to Parabrahman with utmost servitude.

RELEVANCE OF 'SWAMINARAYAN BHASHYAM' TODAY

Swami Bhadreshdas also explains about the importance and benefits of his *bhashya* in today's society and scholarly circles. He says, "'Swaminarayan Bhashyam' will be helpful to all generations of people in two ways:

"First, it will provide valid answers to life's profound problems. In our rapidly growing materialistic society it is becoming clear that spirituality will provide solutions to our burgeoning mundane issues. The Upanishads, Brahmasutras and Gita explain that spirituality is *brahmavidya* or *paravidya*. The 'Swaminarayan Bhashyam' provides clear and unique understandings of *brahmavidya*. One who understands and imbibes *brahmavidya* in his life will find lasting solutions to his problems.

"Second, in the history of Indian and Western philosophy the 'Swaminarayan Bhashyam' sheds new light altogether, which will inspire scholars in India and abroad to investigate and do further research. 'Swaminarayan Bhashyam' will also spark research in exploring new meanings and perspectives to the shlokas and words in the Prasthantrayi."

To accomplish the 'Swaminarayan Bhashyam', Swami Bhadreshdas has rigorously studied Sanskrit and the Shad Darshanas for 25 years. He attained his undergraduate and postgraduate (M.A.) degrees after studying Sanskrit and Shad Darshanas at the Sampoornanand University, Benaras, and the Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan in Mumbai. Thereafter, he accomplished his PhD on the subject of Bhagavad Gita from Karnataka University. The Kavikulguru Kalidas Sanskrit University, Nagpur, awarded him a DLitt for his unique commentaries (*bhashyas* on Prasthanstrayi) and the highest academic honour of 'Mahamahopadhyay'. The University of Mysore honoured him with the Professor G.M. Memorial Award. Swami Bhadreshdas has also written many research articles and papers on the Upanishads and the Bhagavad Gita. He teaches and also guides many PhD students.

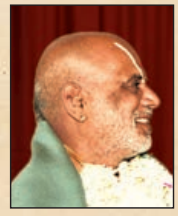
The 'Swaminarayan Bhashyam' has been introduced into the academic curriculum at Somnatha University, Gujarat. Scholars at Harvard and Oxford Universities have shown interest in the 'Swaminarayan Bhashyam'.

Recently, with the blessings of Pramukh Swami Maharaj, Swami Bhadreshdas is studying the Vedas to write *bhashyas* on them.

REVIEWS

"Lucid in style and structured in accordance with the Indian classical tradition, this in-depth and somewhat poetic commentary presents new insights into the secrets of Vedanta in comparison to any previous views on the subject."

- Mahamahopadhyaya
Dr Krishnamurti Shastri,
Member of the Project Committee,
Maharshi Sandipani Rashtriya
Vedavidya Pratishthan, Ujjain



"Indeed, this is a delightful, great work by Sadhu Bhadreshdas, a disciple of the revered Pramukh Swami Maharaj, an expert in an array of scriptures and well-versed in the views of great *acharyas* like Shankara and Ramanuja. With the principles of Vedanta at heart, this poetic prose penetrates the heart and yet adheres to the manner of the traditional commentaries."

- Mahamahopadhyaya
Prof. N.S. Ramanuja Tatacharya
Former Vice-Chancellor of
Rashtriya Sanskrit Vidyapith,
Tirupati, and profound scholar of Vedant

(Contd. on pg. 54)

Pramukh Swami Maharaj's Vicharan

June 2013, Sarangpur

In Sarangpur, Swamishri followed his routine of doing Thakorji's darshan and giving darshan to devotees in the morning and evenings. During these times youths and devotees rejoiced before Swamishri by performing traditional dances and skits. During the day Swamishri also attended to some letters from devotees.

5, Wednesday; Yogi Jayanti Celebration

Swamishri gave darshan to sadhus and devotees from Akshar Jharukho (cabin) in the morning. He inaugurated a new Gujarati print publication, 'Ek Divya Jivan Gatha' (The Life Story of Bhagwan Swaminarayan) by Aksharjivan Swami, published by Swaminarayan Aksharpith.

In the evening the 122nd birthday celebration of Yogiji Maharaj (Yogi Jayanti) was celebrated in the presence of Swamishri and senior sadhus. The celebration included an audio speech and kirtan of Yogiji Maharaj, a skit showing Yogiji Maharaj's meeting with Colonial Bhatia at Faizabad Station, kirtan by Pujya Ghanshyamcharan Swami and senior sadhus honouring Swamishri with garlands. With requests from all, Swamishri demonstrated how Yogiji Maharaj gave his patent pat to devotees.

13, Thursday; 63rd Pramukh Varni Din Celebration

Swamishri gave darshan to all from Akshar Jharukho in the afternoon. In the evening the celebration assembly included a traditional dance by schoolchildren of BAPS Vidyamandir and a skit by youths from the Youth Training Centre. A traditional dance was performed by children on the bhajan *'Swamiji to Mahāpratāpi…'* while Swamishri rang a bell and waved the BAPS flag from Akshar Jharukho. Senior sadhus honoured Swamishri with garlands and a shawl of flowers. Then Swamishri blessed all, saying, "By the grace of Shastriji Maharaj you have all come here with enthusiasm to celebrate this festival. In the time of Shastriji Maharaj no one had imagined that our Satsang would grow to such proportions. At that time Yogiji Maharaj, Nirgun Swami and Shastriji Maharaj were actively engaged in inspiring satsang. Their talks were full of energy and joy. The devotees, too, were spiritually charged and excited…" Thereafter, Pujya Viveksagar Swami narrated the historic appointment of Swamishri as President at Ambli Vali Pol.

16, Sunday

Swamishri inaugurated a print publication, *Satsang Vihar*, Part 2, by Harichintan Swami, published by Swaminarayan Aksharpith. ◆

(Translation of excerpts from Swamishri's daily report in Gujarati)

LIVING WITH SWAMISHRI

June 2013, Sarangpur

MEASURE OF GOOD HEALTH

4 June, Sarangpur

Swamishri's blood pressure and pulse were measured after he woke up in the morning. Yogvivek Swami asked Swamishri whether he was fine. Swamishri said yes. Hariprakash Swami enquired further, "Are you absolutely fine?" Swamishri replied, "I am fine because of *katha-varta* and bhajan."

The core of Gunatit gurus lives lies in listening to or speaking about the glory of Shriji Maharaj and in remembering him by singing his name.

GURU BHAKTI

5 June, Sarangpur

It was Yogi Jayanti Celebration. Prior to Swamishri's darshan from Akshar Jharukho the attendant sadhu placed a beautiful garland around Swamishri. Swamishri tried to take out the garland. Narayancharan Swami requested Swamishri, "You have to keep the garland around your neck." Swamishri responded, "The garland should be placed on the *murti* of Yogiji Maharaj." The attendant sadhu clarified, "It has been offered to Yogiji Maharaj and now that sanctified garland is around your neck." Swamishri remained quiet.

Swamishri's words reflected his deep feelings of reverence and honour for Yogiji Maharaj. On learning that the garland placed on him had been offered to his guru's *murti* Swamishri became satisfied. ◆

(Translation of excerpts from Swamishri's daily report in Gujarati)

BAPS Uttarakhand Flood Relief, India

June-July 2013

THE DISASTER

India's monsoon moved across the northern part of the country with record speed this year as raging rivers, flanked by steep-sided and deforested valleys in the foothills of the Himalayas, washed away homes and vehicles. Pilgrims who were travelling to or from pilgrimage places in the Uttarakhand region were among those killed or left stranded. Uttaranchal state, which has a population of almost 10 million people, received unprecedented rainfall in mid-June, causing rivers to burst their banks. The heaviest rains in the last 88 years resulted in large flashfloods and massive landslides. Entire villages and settlements were obliterated. A total of 4,200 villages were affected. This was India's worst natural disaster since the tsunami in 2004.

BAPS PROVIDES IMMEDIATE SUPPLIES

In the wake of this tragedy, BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha in India (BAPS) provided immediate relief to those affected by the floods and landslides. Inspired by Pramukh Swami Maharaj, BAPS Swaminarayan Akshardham in New Delhi coordinated and executed the relief efforts in Uttarakhand with the support of BAPS centres in India and its partner BAPS Charities. Dr. JM Dave, Jayesh Gadhia, Jaisukh Zala and Dr. Yogesh Bambharoliya served as the main BAPS Relief Coordinators for coordination and execution of BAPS relief efforts in Uttarakhand, India.

Immediately, food, blankets and other emergency supplies were sent from Swaminarayan Akshardham in New Delhi to Uttarakhand for distribution to the victims. Thereafter, BAPS engaged in relief efforts as follows.

SURVEY, ORGANIZATION & ASSISTANCE

BAPS volunteers surveyed the impact of the floods and landslides and held extensive meetings with local officials,

Swamishri looks at the items of the relief kit

NGOs and other organizations. BAPS volunteers worked with local NGOs like Parmarth Niketan in Rishikesh, helping to efficiently organize stocking of relief materials, creating inventory systems, developing work flow systems and establishing guidelines for relief aid. BAPS volunteers also assisted other organizations in transporting, stocking and packing of various relief materials.

SOURCING, TRANSPORTING & DISTRIBUTING RELIEF KITS AND SUPPLIES

Over 640 BAPS volunteers in New Delhi, Ahmedabad and Uttarakhand worked tirelessly to source, pack, transport, organize and distribute over 8,500 kits including 60 tons of food and 50 tons of household supplies. Despite the difficult terrains and the danger of landslides, BAPS volunteers and partners personally visited villages to distribute food rations and household supplies in over 30 villages. 1,200 tarpaulins, 230 tents and 14,250 blankets were provided for the homeless and needy. Thus, the kits met the immediate food, shelter and household needs of the afflicted.

Food Kits: BAPS packed and distributed 8,500 kits totalling over 60 tons, each with 24 food items: wheat flour, rice, pulses (*mung dal, chana, chana dal, roasted chana*), water bottle, oil and ghee (*sarsav* oil, cooking oil and ghee), sugar, jaggery, snacks (biscuits, *aloo bhajiya*, mix *namkeen*, *kurkure*, toasted bread), spice (chilli powder, turmeric powder, *dhana-jiru* powder, mustard seeds), salt, tea, milk powder.

Household Kits: BAPS provided, organized and distributed 50 tons of 38 relief items: blankets, flashlights, batteries, candles, solar lanterns, bed sheets, match sticks, steel plates, steel glasses, steel bowls (small), steel spoons, steel pots, steel storage bins, sieve, tongs, primus stoves, gas cylinders, raincoats, umbrellas, shoes, slippers, towels, napkins, toothbrushes, toothpastes, tongue cleaners, soaps, combs, mirrors (small), saris, plastic bags, carton boxes, mosquito repellants.

Provided Medical Relief & Counselling: Volunteer doctors of BAPS conducted medical camps, offered medical counselling and treated over 200 victims. In addition,

SUMMARY OF BAPS RELIEF AID

Villages Reached	30 villages (Dists: Rudraprayag, Uttarkashi, Guptakashi, Bageshwar, Pithoragarh, Chamoli, Tharali, Chinyalisaur, Joshimath, Ukhimath).
Relief Provided	2,140 families.
Medical Relief	Over 200 patients treated in BAPS medical camps; medical kits provided to 25 villages.
Food Kits Supplied	8,500 kits totalling 60 tons of 24 food items, packed and distributed.
Household Kits Distributed	Total of 50 tons of 38 relief items provided and distributed.
Shelters Provided	1,200 tarpaulins and 230 tents provided for the homeless.

BAPS volunteers preparing food kits at Swaminarayan Mandir, Ahmedabad

BAPS provided and distributed medicines and first aid materials to needy patients, families, medical personnel in affected villages and other organizations.

BAPS Relief Team: 643 Dedicated Volunteers

Procurement, Packing and Transport: 600 Part-Time Volunteers.

Logistics & Distribution: 23 Full-Time Volunteers.

Administration & Support: 20 Full-Time Volunteers.

APPRECIATION

"We are happy that BAPS and its volunteers are here, working with us for the Uttarakhand relief. By them participating, our organization is benefiting and is being guided by their experience, discipline and efficiency."

- H.H. Swami Chidanand Saraswatiji Maharaj,
President and Spiritual Head of Parmarth Niketan Ashram, Rishikesh, India

Village heads, called 'Pradhans', were extremely appreciative of BAPS Volunteers' genuine efforts and spirit of service while conducting their relief efforts. Mr Sandeep Panwar, Pradhan of Gram Panchayat – Athali, Uttarakandh, said, *"(BAPS Volunteers) coming to our village and going to each and every house and understanding our necessities was very vital for us. We truly appreciate their kind effort."*

Highlighting the efforts by BAPS relief volunteers, Mr. Satyendra Ukashi, relief volunteer of Uttarkashi's Vishwanath Sanskrit Mahavidyal, said, *"(We were) highly impressed by BAPS volunteers' level of detailing in terms of execution, practical decision-making and documentation."*

RELIEF PARTNERS AND SUPPORT ORGANIZATIONS

BAPS Charities, North America; BAPS Charities, UK; Parmarth Niketan, Rishikesh, Uttarakhand; Government of India; Indo-Tibetan Border Police, Uttarkashi; Government of Gujarat; Gadhwal Maitra Sabha and SAMARTH, New Delhi. ◆

India

YUVAK-YUVATI SHIBIR, 8-10 June 2013, Sankari

In the presence of Pujya Mahant Swami, 915 *yuvaks* and *yuvatis* from the regions of Sankari, Bardoli and Ukai participated in a *shibir* based on the theme 'Live for BAPS'. The youths were guided and inspired through speeches by Mahant Swami and other learned and experienced sadhus. Question-answer sessions, video shows and discussions provided further clarification of the major topics. The youths were also given career guidance by an experienced civil servant, Shri Jagdishbhai Bardiya. At the end of the *shibir* the youths undertook pledges to live by the wishes of Bhagwan Swaminarayan and guru Pramukh Swami Maharaj. All the youths were given *malas* which had been sanctified by Swamishri in Sarangpur.

RATH YATRA CELEBRATION 10 July 2013, Kolkata

Continuing an annual tradition, the BAPS Shri Swaminarayan Mandir, Kolkata, held a colourful Rath Yatra celebration on 10 July 2013. Outside the BAPS Shri Swaminarayan Mandir on Chakraberia Road, Vedic pujan rituals of the *murtis* of Shri Akshar-Purushottam Maharaj, Shri Jagannathji, Subhadraji and Balbhadraji were

performed in the afternoon. Invited dignitaries then swept the road in front of the main chariot before pulling it for a short distance, joined by devotees and wellwishers.

The grand parade featured the BAPS Kolkata Youth 'Scottish Pipes' Marching Band, children dressed as famous devotees of the past, women in traditional costumes and a float carrying a miniature *yagna* pit. Thousands of onlookers throughout the route enjoyed the delightful procession, which returned to the mandir and concluded at 7.00 p.m.

BAL-BALIKA SHIBIR: 'UTTISHTHA' – AWAKE FOR SELF-IMPROVEMENT 28 July 2013, New Delhi

Over 250 boys and girls from the National Capital Territory and its surrounding areas participated in a special one-day *shibir* at the BAPS Swaminarayan Research Institute, Swaminarayan Akshardham, New Delhi, on 28 July. The *shibir* was graced by Pujya Swayamprakashdas

Swami (Doctor Swami). Based on the theme 'Utishtha' or 'Awake' the *shibir* hoped to motivate the children to focus on self-improvement in Satsang, *sanskars* and studies. Along with interesting workshops, the *shibir* included games, skits, video shows and engaging talks by sadhus. Activity notebooks encouraged the children to discuss the following topics: 1. The right age for improvement, 2. Fruits of improvement, 3. Where can I improve? 4. Hurdles in improvement, 5. Sacrifice for improvement and 6. Satsang – The best way for 100% improvement.

Children were also honoured to be addressed by Pujya Doctor Swami, who in his captivating style gave them unparalleled guidance in becoming better sons and daughters, siblings, students, and citizens.

UK & Europe

CELEBRATING WORLD ENVIRONMENT DAY
5 June 2013, London

Every year, 5 June is celebrated by millions internationally as World Environment Day (WED).

BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha celebrated World Environment Day in the UK with a presentation supporting this year's theme, 'Think.Eat.Save: Reduce Your Food Print', and building upon the UN Secretary-General's Zero Hunger Challenge.

The presentation was displayed at BAPS Shri Swaminarayan Mandir, London, throughout the week. It comprised a series of eye-opening facts about food wastage and practical tips on safely cutting back.

To help reduce wastage and lessen the burden on global resources, devotees and visitors were encouraged to make a number of small but important lifestyle changes. These included:

DON'T buy more food than you really need. FREEZE fresh produce and leftovers. GROW an organic garden. GET SMART about less waste, great taste – plan meals, use shopping lists and avoid impulse buys. EAT ORGANIC and locally grown foods and help reduce the clearing of forests for agricultural land.

Other recent BAPS environment projects include observing Earth Hour and recycling clothes for Climate Week.

'BECOME ADARSH', PERSONAL SATSANG DEVELOPMENT: PHASE ONE
20-30 June 2013, UK & Europe

The first phase of the year-long spiritual development programme for youths in the UK, entitled 'Become Adarsh', was attended by more than 700 participants during June 2013. In the presence of Pujya Mahant Swami and Anandswarup Swami, youths from London and the Home Counties gathered at BAPS Shri Swaminarayan Mandir, London, on 22 June 2013 to complete the first leg of their 'Become Adarsh' journey.

Mahant Swami encouraged all participants to draw inspiration from Pramukh Swami Maharaj as the highest ideal and to introspect on one's spiritual progress.

Following the traditional opening with the lighting of *divas*, youths embarked upon their assessment with a written paper which probed knowledge of daily rituals (*arti, thal, prarthana* and *cheshta*). The written element was followed by an opportunity for the participants to recite aspects of these daily rituals, which, in addition to recollection, tested correct pronunciation, melody and meaning.

Youths from centres based in the Midlands

and north England completed their first phase a week later in Leicester and Manchester.

The feedback from participants was highly encouraging with many expressing the positive impact on their lives. Specifically, youths shared how much more they now enjoy their daily rituals, especially with an enhanced understanding of the various verses from the materials provided in the project pack.

'AKSHARNA JHARUKHETHI' NATIONAL KARYAKAR SHIBIR
23 June 2013, London

In the presence of Pujya Mahant Swami and other sadhus from India, more than 1,100 *karyakars* from the UK and Europe attended the National Karyakar Shibir at BAPS Shri Swaminarayan Mandir, London.

The theme of the *shibir* was 'Aksharna Jharukhethi', drawing references from what Swamishri sees from the balcony as sadhus and devotees gather for his darshan. The *shibir* thus focused on the spiritual concepts of *antardrashti* (introspection), *asmita* (pride) and *samarpan* (sacrifice).

Some of the experiences with Swamishri from Sarangpur were shared via a video presentation in the opening session, which also included a discourse from Jnanpriya Swami who spoke about keeping Bhagwan Swaminarayan and Swamishri at the forefront of one's thoughts during one's *seva*.

Mahant Swami reflected upon whom we have attained (God and guru) and for whom we are performing our religious duties. He elaborated upon the need to strive for their blessings and to introspect continuously while performing *seva*.

Breakout sessions for departments and *mandals* were held to enable *karyakars* to discuss key issues that relate to their more specific activities.

In the closing session Anandswarup Swami spoke about Swamishri's wishes for *karyakars*, focusing specifically on developing one's personal satsang. Mahant Swami then concluded the *shibir* with an enlightening address on understanding the importance of *seva* and remaining humble while performing it.

The positive spiritual messages throughout the day enthused and guided all the *karyakars* towards earnestly doing their best.

Africa

SATSANG WINTER CAMP
23-27 July 2013, Africa & Middle East

From 23 to 27 July 2013, over 100 *kishores* attended a winter camp held in Mombasa. The theme of the camp was 'Agna, Upasana, Sadbhav and Paksh'.

Centered on this concept, *kishores* learnt various ways to strengthen their satsang and balance their spiritual, cultural and personal lives. In addition, *kishores* participated in a number of team building activities and research on Hinduism. Practical workshops on cooking and special programmes including beach activities and visiting sacred places of Yogiji Maharaj were also or-

ganized. Personal sessions and group discussions with sadhus were also very helpful to *kishores*. This was the first such winter camp organized by BAPS in Africa specifically for *kishores*.

'SWAMI MARA, HU SWAMI NO' SHIBIR
7 June 2013, Kisumu, Kenya

About 110 boys and girls from the western Kenyan cities of Eldoret, Kakamega and Kisumu gathered at Kisumu mandir for an active and engaging *shibir* centred on the theme: 'Swami Mara, Hu Swami No' – 'Swami Is Mine, I am His'.

The *shibir* was organized in three sessions. The first session focused on guru Pramukh Swami Maharaj's saintliness and virtues. The second session focused on how the power of our guru's virtues have brought about amazing transformations of lives. The final session explored how we may please our guru and follow his wishes. All three sessions included instructive speeches, interactive games, questions-answer sessions, interesting discussions, videos and traditional dances.

BAPS MEDICAL CHECK-UP CAMP
23 June 2013, Dar-es-Salaam, Tanzania

Over 250 people benefited from the free medical check-up camp organized by BAPS. Among the screening tests provided were: blood sugar, BMI, blood pressure, eye test and bone density.

BAPS CHARITIES FOOD DRIVE
4 August 2013, Dar-es-salaam

BAPS Charities volunteers visited the Multiple Development Foundation Sunnat Orphanage located in the Yombo Vituka area to distribute mattresses and food items to the orphans. The orphans were fasting for the holy month of Ramadan, thus requiring a wider variety of foods.

Asia-Pacific

BAPS EDUCATIONAL SEMINAR
22 June 2013, Adelaide

Over 70 Gujarati students currently studying in high school and 190 parents attended an education seminar held by BAPS at Klemzig Primary School, Adelaide. The primary aim of the seminar was to disseminate information on secondary education. The Education Seminar featured a presentation and talks on the Australian education system by an experienced teacher, a parent and a panel discussion involving successful professionals. The opening presentation on the Australian education system dispelled common misconceptions that parents and students had and provided a perspective on how they could better select their subjects and apply for university.

The panel discussion provided different perspectives regarding parental expectations, student expectations and the common distracting factors in education. It further guided parents and students on effective study balance, time management, career opportunities and the importance of satsang during school.

Representatives from leading universities in the state, The University of Adelaide and Flinders University were present to answer questions about enrolment, university life and entrance requirements. Representatives from the South Australian Education Board also gave valuable insights to students and parents.

BAL-BALIKA SHIBIR: 'RAJIPO'
22 June 2013, Auckland

Around 100 *balaks* and *balikas* participated in BAPS New Zealand's first ever National Bal-Balika Shibir. Aged between 6 and 13, children

from the Auckland area and Wellington attended the *shibir* held in the presence of Jnanpurush Swami and Adarshmuni Swami. This year's *shibir* was based on the theme of 'Rajipo'. During the *shibir* children got to learn about what *rajipo* is and how one can earn Swamishri's *rajipo*.

BAPS SYDNEY PARTICIPATES IN PLANET ARK'S NATIONAL TREE DAY 2013

28 July 2013, Sydney

Volunteers from BAPS Shri Swaminarayan Mandir, Sydney, took part in the National Tree Day, which provides all Australians with an opportunity to help the environment and reconnect with nature. The event is organized under the joint auspices of Planet Ark and the City Council of Paramatta.

The theme of this year's National Tree Day was "Get Outside and Grow…" to help increase biodiversity and provide habitat for wildlife in the Baronbali Street Reserve in Dundas.

15 *yuvaks* and 9 *yuvatis* participated in the event on behalf of BAPS Shri Swaminarayan Mandir, Sydney, and assisted in planting native plant species over an area spanning 200 square metres. ◆

(Contd. from pg. 44)

"I found this a quite well-studied work containing both comparative and critical accounts. It provides word by word meaning, creates doubt and establishes an opposition, and constitutes and proliferates Vedantic principles giving them credibility and reflecting the intellectual aptitude of its commentator. The gamut covered is very vast, and despite that, the commentator has neither missed an important point nor dwelt on any superfluously."

- Prof. Madan Mohan Agrawal,
Head, Dept. of Sanskrit, Chairman,
BRS(Arts) and Dean, Faculty of Arts,
Delhi University

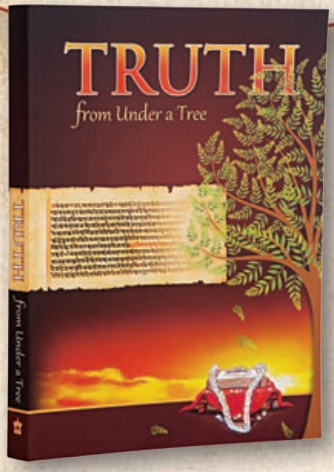
"This commentary's uniqueness is in its extraordinary quality. Truly each word of this commentary presents and highlights a treasure of Vedic principles which are not seen earlier. This commentary offers new rendering of the eternal Vedic principles. It takes the individual in the Vedanta philosophy to a greater height. An in-depth study of this commentary will certainly take us to a higher altitude of the Vedanta world. It convincingly explains and establishes the eternal truth of the Vedic philosophy revealed by Bhagwan Shri Swaminarayan. It is an unbiased work and has not been written against any other tradition."

- Dr N. Radhakrishna Bhat,
Head, Dept. of Sanskrit,
Karnataka State Open University, Mysore

Correction: In the July-August 2013 edition of Swaminarayan Bliss the *murti-pratishtha* of BAPS Swaminarayan Mandir, Selvas, was performed in the month of Vaishakh instead of Chaitra as mentioned on page 39.

New Swaminarayan Aksharpith Publications

For Teenagers and Youths

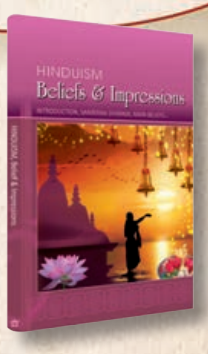


TRUTH
from Under a Tree

by Sadhu Snehmunidas

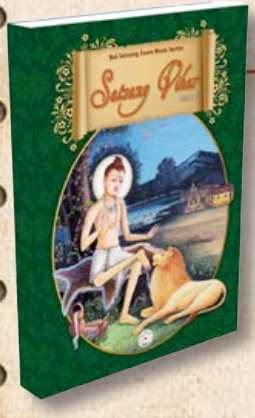
Truth from Under a Tree explores the profound personality of Bhagwan Swaminarayan in context to the Vachanamrut – a sacred text containing his spiritual discourses. The spiritual and practical aspects from Bhagwan Swaminarayan's teachings have been highlighted in an appealing style for teenagers and youths. Some of the relevant features for all spiritual seekers of Truth are good company, scriptural knowledge, sadhanas, perfect mentorship and requisites to spiritual realization. The book is spiritually enriching and enlightening.

HINDUISM
Beliefs & Impressions



by Sadhu Vivekjivandas

The plurality in Hinduism has often been compared to a bouquet of flowers and a salad bowl. The discrete contents of a bouquet or salad bowl combine together to form a single product. Similarly, the multiplicity of beliefs, practices, *sampradayas*, etc. all blend to produce a single, fascinating spiritual canvas called Hinduism. *Hinduism, Beliefs and Impressions* is a pocket-size publication on the core beliefs of Hindus and impressions of foreign scholars and historians about India and Hinduism.



Satsang Vihar
Part 2

Translated by Sadhu Brahmasetudas

Satsang Vihar, Part 2, is for children. The beautiful stories from Hinduism and Satsang history convey the principles of *murti*-puja and *avatarvad*, the childhood of Bhagwan Swaminarayan and the travels of Nilkanth Varni. Also, stories from the life of our guru *parampara* portray their inspiring lives and teachings. The book contains two sections: *upasana* and *agna*. The illustrations on every page make the stories interesting to read and understand. *Satsang Vihar*, Part 2, inspires all children with values and faith in God.

Available at all BAPS bookstores

On 9 July 2013, Pramukh Swami Maharaj blesses the first class of sadhus enrolled in the advanced Sanskrit course at the Mahavidyalaya in Sarangpur

INAUGURATION OF 'BAPS SWAMINARAYAN SANSKRIT MAHAVIDYALAYA'

4 August 2013, Sarangpur

Bhagwan Swaminarayan encouraged his *paramhansas* to study Sanskrit and the Hindu shastras. This tradition has been continued by his Gunatit guru *parampara*. In 1961, Brahmaswarup Yogiji Maharaj established the BAPS Sanstha's first Sanskrit study institute, 'Akshar-Purushottam (Swaminarayan) Sanskrit Pathshala', in Mumbai. Thereafter, in 1973 Pragat Brahmaswarup Pramukh Swami Maharaj founded the 'Yagnapurush Sanskrit Vidyalaya' in Sarangpur. Through both these institutes, BAPS sadhus have excelled in the study of Sanskrit and Hindu shastras. So far, 12 sadhus who have graduated from these two institutes have acquired PhD degrees.

Of particular note are the achievements of Bhadreshdas Swami who has written the 'Shri Swaminarayan Bhashyam' based on the Prasthantreyi and convincingly elucidated Bhagwan Swaminarayan's Akshar-Purushottam philosophy. Also, Shrutiprakashdas Swami has composed the voluminous 'Akshar-Purushottam Mahatmaya' comprising of 19,103 Sanskrit shlokas and fulfilled the wish of Brahmaswarup Shastriji Maharaj.

To further facilitate the in-depth study of Sanskrit to Shastri and Acharya levels the 'BAPS Swaminarayan Sanskrit Mahavidyalaya' has been established in Sarangpur in affiliation with Shri Somnath University, Veraval. On 4 August 2013, the vice-chancellor of Somnath Sanskrit University, Shri V. Kutumb Shastriji, formally announced the affiliation in the presence of invited dignitaries.

Informing the gathering of the University's regulations and procedures, university registrar, Shri Dashrathbhai Jadav, said, "This is the world's first university to offer the study of Swaminarayan Vedanta."

Shri V. Kutumb Shastriji, Vice-chancellor of Somnath Sanskrit University, inaugurates the 'BAPS Swaminarayan Sanskrit Mahavidyalaya' and announces its affiliation with Shri Somnath University, Veraval

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